

The Magician Who Rose From Failure:

Tales of War and Magic

5



Author:
**Gamei
Hitsuji**
Illustrator:
**Saika
Fushimi**



The Magician Who Rose From Failure:

Tales of War and Magic

5

Author:
**Gamei
Hitsuji**

Illustrator:
**Saika
Fushimi**



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: A Late Start](#)

[Part 1: The Gazing Kings](#)

[Part 2: The Celebration](#)

[Part 3: Charlotte's Sword](#)

[Epilogue: When Arcus Made \[REDACTED\]](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue: A Late Start

As Chain made her parting request, Arcus was overcome with drowsiness; as quickly as he lost consciousness, he woke up. His head felt oddly clear under the circumstances; he experienced none of the typical weariness of the freshly roused.

He looked up to see an uninspiring ceiling of cloth, and deduced he was in a tent. His body was laid on a makeshift bed, and white curtains cut off much of the surroundings. A small Sol Glass stood on a simple stand next to his pillow, filling the space with an abundant glow despite the lack of natural daylight.

Arcus made to get up.

“Unngh... Can’t...move...”

His body refused to listen to him. It was a struggle just to roll over. The curtain flipped open as Arcus bewilderedly considered his next move, revealing a woman in a white robe.

“My, I see you are awake.”

“Um, yeah...” Her gentle tone caught him off guard.

“Don’t force yourself to get up. May I ask you to keep resting?”

“Sure...”

“Thank you.” The woman stepped forwards and let the curtain fall back behind her. From what Arcus could tell, her body was slender beneath the robe. He would guess she was in her thirties. Her blonde hair was tied up behind her head in a simple ponytail, and there was an air of cleanliness about her.

She was careful in the way she came in and the way she treated the objects around her, and yet Arcus caught glimpses of haughtiness in her actions, painting a very strange picture indeed. He couldn’t shake the impression that she resembled a career woman from the man’s world.

Regardless of his impression, from her white robe he could tell she was a

healer from the army tasked with subjugating Count Nadar.

Arcus was covered in wounds when he collapsed; she was probably the one who had treated him. He belatedly picked up on the strong scent of medical herbs from the air around him.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” replied Arcus.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“Yes, I’m Arcus Raytheft.”

“Thank you. It looks like your memory hasn’t suffered at all.”

Word of his waking must have reached other healers—they began hurrying in and out of the tent. One went to send word outside. One came with a pitcher of water and helped him to drink. One took his pulse; another came to wipe his neck and face. Each worked with the utmost diligence.

“Um, why is everyone giving me so much attention?”

“His Royal Highness wills it.”

“O-Oh...”

Arcus shrank back, a little overwhelmed by the idea. The healer didn’t react, instead picking up a form and asking him a brisk series of questions. For a while it seemed they would never end.

“Can you move your left arm?”

“My left arm? Uh...”

It was only then that it all came back to him. His use of Spinning Barrel during the fight against Dyssea had pushed his left arm past its limit. He tried to move it then, and his hand too, worried he’d caused them permanent damage.

“Ugh...”

As he’d half-expected, his fingers and elbow merely twitched a little.

I guess I went too far...

Arcus glanced at the doctor, a message that his arm would move no further.

“I see,” she murmured. “We have done everything in our power to treat you. However, by the looks of things, you won’t have lost all movement in your arm permanently. We’ll have to be patient and continue to treat you until you are fully healed.”

“Okay...”

It was a little unnerving that magic wasn’t enough to fix his arm completely, but it was good to know the damage wasn’t permanent. Arcus supposed he should count himself lucky that they managed that much. It was still moving a little, which meant his nerves were still sending the right messages. As long as it could heal *enough*, he’d make do somehow.

He was a magician, after all.

I really need to brush up on my healing magic.

His thoughts were interrupted by a thick hand sweeping away the curtain.

“Huh. You really are awake.”

“Uncle...”

That hearty voice signaled the arrival of Arcus’s uncle, Craib Abend. He was dressed, as usual, with a military jacket slung across his shoulders. He stepped into the partition without waiting for anyone’s permission, and Arcus caught a whiff of cigar smoke.

The healer looked less than pleased with his intrusion. She shot him a rotten scowl. Craib brushed her off with an awkward chuckle. Noah and Cazzy came in behind him. They were both dressed in their usual uniforms. They received no glare from the doctor—likely because they looked much neater than Craib.

“Good morning, uncle.”

“‘Good morning’?” Craib looked inexplicably exasperated.

Arcus turned to the doctor for help, but she averted her gaze like she had no idea what his problem was. Was it not morning anymore, perhaps?

While the doctor pretended she hadn’t just greeted him in the same manner, Noah spoke up. “Master Arcus, it is already the afternoon—a full week since your incapacitation.”

“I ain’t ever seen nobody sleep *that* long! Gotta say I’m impressed, Master!” Cazzy cackled.

His servants were acting like nothing was amiss; Arcus felt reassured.

The healers left them be, at which point Craib flumped down in a chair.

“I’ve been out for a week?”

“Yeah. We thought ya weren’t ever gonna wake up!” Cazzy said.

“Indeed.”

“You sure like to cause trouble, kid.” Craib sighed.

Arcus laughed nervously.

“It’s nothing to laugh about. Once you’re dead, you’re dead—and you can forget about all the stuff you wanted to do with your life.”

“Yeah. I do try to keep that in mind.”

“I sure hope you do.”

Craib’s lecture barely lasted more than a scant few sentences. He must have known Arcus had little choice than to do what he did. But Arcus was grateful that he cared enough to warn him in the first place.

“It seems about time that I ask for a bonus,” said Noah. “You pay me far too little for the amount of stress you cause.”

“Sorry for making you worry, but I don’t think that’s a real reason for a bonus...”

“I’m employed to carry out errands on your behalf. You never mentioned mental anguish when I signed up.”

“I swear you’re gonna bleed me dry, Noah...”

“Ya had us fightin’ hard too and all. I’d expect a little extra for that, yeah?”

“This sounds like a slippery slope. You’re not gonna start asking for bonuses for every little thing now, are you?”

“Oh, great idea! Ya sure are cunning! I like it!” Cazzy cackled.

Arcus shook his head. “Uncle, how goes the war effort? I gather it should be

nearly over by now, if it isn't already."

"That's what you wanna know right off the bat? Eh, I guess I get it though."

"Please tell me."

"Lemme start by saying it's over. The subjugation forces won."

"Really? Thank goodness."

"Obviously. I mean, it was won the second I showed up," Craib boasted, puffing out his chest.

Noah readjusted his monocle, as a hardened aide would, and launched into a more detailed explanation. "After the battle on the plains, His Royal Highness's troops pursued the fleeing Porque Nadar. The final stage was a siege, but Nadar was already weakened from all the fighting. His stronghold fell within two days. Lady Louise took his head."

"So that's how it all ended, huh?"

He could suddenly hear Deet's cry in his head, outraged that his mother took the biggest prize for herself.

Cazzy scratched at the back of his head awkwardly. "We did have a couple of close calls on toppa that, though..."

"But nothing major?"

"Nothin' major," he confirmed. "I was sure those Empire soldiers were gonna give us some trouble after they showed up, but in the end they up and left once we were done on the plains." Cazzy's lips stretched into a cheerful grin. "I heard ya fought real hard. The imperial guard were really praisin' ya, y'know."

"Oh, um..."

"You gave them Empire soldiers *and* the Black Panther Cavalry a run for their money, yeah? Not many people can say the same!"

"I was just...focused, I guess. His Royal Highness was there too."

"Focused? Getting outta that pinch was no small feat. His Royal Highness wasn't even hurt—and it was all down to your protection. That's a massive achievement, Arcus." Arcus's uncle, usually so strict, lavished him with praise.

He always came down hard on Arcus when they trained together, so now he felt extra self-conscious.

“It’s not like you to praise me, uncle.”

“My, are you trying to make Craib look bad? Come on, own up.”

“I was being serious. Stop messing around, idiot.” Craib gave Noah a light punch to the head. Cazzy was doubled up with laughter, and much to Arcus’s satisfaction, he also received a punch. “You guys think you’re funny, huh?”

“Sorry. I’m really not used to you praising me like that though,” Arcus said.

“It’s my policy to give praise where it’s due. You did something incredible out there, and it’s only right that I recognize you for it.”

“R-Right.” Arcus quickly changed the subject before his embarrassment became too obvious. “By the way, what happened to Eido?”

Eido had turned on his co-conspirators to save him and Ceylan at the very end; in turn, Ceylan had said that he would spare Eido from the punishment his prior actions had earned. Arcus needed to know how the situation had resolved in his absence.

Craib looked to the side and jerked his chin. “He’s over there.”

“What?”

Noah opened the curtain wider, revealing Eido. He was as lean as ever and wearing his usual hat. Arcus wondered how long he’d been standing there without him realizing.

Craib shrugged with a sigh. “You coulda just joined the conversation, y’know.”

“You were talking among friends. I didn’t want to interrupt.” A thin smile rose to Eido’s lips.

“You don’t have to be *that* polite. Jeez.” Craib clicked his tongue.

“I heard that His Royal Highness knows Eido. You sound like you know him too, uncle.”

“Yeah. I had the displeasure of meeting him when the capital was all in a mess.”

“We used to fight, then go out for drinks. We didn’t talk much—but it looks like he’s changed since then.”

Craib frowned back at Eido, as if to try and shut him up. Arcus remembered Craib talking about running away from home—or something along those lines—when Eido first showed up. Arcus wouldn’t be surprised if Craib didn’t like to talk about that time of his life.

Eido took up a position in front of the bed. “Arcus.”

“Yeah?”

“I got in your way during this fight. And now I stand here. I want to know how that makes you feel—honestly.”

It was a pertinent question—he’d stood in their way as an enemy before, and only came here at Ceylan’s bidding. It was no wonder he wanted to know where he stood with Arcus.

It wasn’t just Arcus’s eyes which widened in surprise—those of his other visitors did too.

There was a pause, until Craib scratched the back of his head like he was fed up. “Why you gotta be so serious all the time, huh?”

“There are some answers you’ll never find unless you ask for them. Don’t you think it makes sense?”

“I guess...”

“Please, Arcus. I’d like to hear your answer,” Eido pressed.

There was only one thing for Arcus to say. “I don’t...really think anything about it.”

“Are you sure? I may have come willingly, but do not forget that I was set against you for a time.”

“But you rescued us in the end. That makes us even, right?”

“Only because of His Royal Highness’s ridiculous logic. My aid says nothing about me; I was simply swept up in the situation.”

“Like my uncle said, you’re being very serious about this, and now you’re

pushing it even more. I think everyone just wants to call it even at this point. Pretend it never happened. That's the best we can do now."

No one here was going to criticize Eido, nor try to drive him away. If everyone was willing to settle things by leaving them unsettled, then what was the use of Eido trying to pin the blame on himself?

"Okay..." Eido finally dropped the subject.

"What are your plans now, Eido?"

"I will remain with you for now. There are questions I need to ask of that man."

No doubt he meant King Shinlu; there were mysteries still to settle concerning the grim day when he'd driven Eido and his men from the capital.

"My uncle should know what happened too," Arcus said.

"Indeed. However—"

"I can't be the one to tell the story. It should come from *him*."

"Really."

"Yes," both men replied at once.

Was it stubbornness, or just reticence—on both their parts?

Noah shook his head disapprovingly, while Cazzy laughed as he always did.

"Uncle, why did you come as reinforcements?"

"It was on His Majesty's orders. The Empire was acting fishy, so I was sent to go check it out."

"You make it sound like His Majesty sent you for a walk..."

Still, Craib was a powerful enough magician that perhaps overthrowing a whole army *was* equivalent to a leisurely walk.

"Apart from the magicians who came first, weren't the others split to keep an eye on the Han Tribe and Granciel?"

"They were, yeah. No one really knew where the suspicious movements were coming from."

“You have to deceive your allies before deceiving your enemy...”

Arcus knew that phrase well from the man’s world, but it was never used in its proper context. This was probably the first time he was truly experiencing its meaning for himself.

The arrival of reinforcements to the subjugation force would have been felt across the entire army. It would have moved differently in its marching and fighting on the field—something which in itself would allow the enemy to sense the reinforcements were on their way. It seemed that the king had kept word of the reinforcements from Ceylan to prevent that.

“What a fascinating turn of phrase. It describes father’s plan perfectly.”

A sudden voice from the other side of the curtain made Arcus jump. Craib, Noah, and Cazzy sprang to their feet, then put their arms to their chest and bowed to greet the noble visitor. They held themselves like they had steel rods in their spines.

Only Eido didn’t react—Arcus still wasn’t sure of his status in society. He turned so he was facing where the visitor would come in, his gaze slightly raised.

The white curtain flipped open, revealing Ceylan. His face was covered, as usual, by a black veil. His headpiece was elaborately decorated, and it resembled that of a Chinese priest. Not his ears, nor his hair, nor the sides of his face were visible. Only the area around his mouth, where the stitching was thinner, gave glimpses of what was underneath when the light hit it. Coupled with his dazzling robe adorned with dragons stitched with golden thread, he gave off a truly magnificent air.

“Y-Your Royal Highness!” Arcus gasped, unable to conceal his surprise.



“I heard you had regained consciousness.”

Arcus couldn't believe Ceylan had come all the way here just to see him; it was unthinkable.

Eulid Rain, head of the imperial guard, opened the curtain wider to grant Ceylan a path inside. The prince sat down in the seat Craib offered him.

“Please accept my apologies for the state I am in, Your Royal Highness.”

“It is quite all right. You sought to protect me, and your body has paid dearly for it. I must atone for what I have put you through.”

“Please, sir, perish the thought.” It made Arcus uneasy that he couldn't even bow his head.

Ceylan brought his face closer. “How is your physical condition? I hope it is nothing too serious.”

“I am not in pain, but I am finding it difficult to move, likely because I have been still for a long while.”

“And your left arm?”

“I can barely move it. The healer says we will just have to see how it responds to ongoing treatment.”

“I see.” Ceylan looked like he wanted to say more, but he was keeping quiet.

If Arcus had to guess, it was something along the lines of “sorry.” But, the prince being who he was, it wasn't a sentiment he was at liberty to voice.

The royal family—particularly Ceylan and Shinlu—had absolute authority in the kingdom. They couldn't apologize or do anything to acknowledge failure. The royal family, like all the hosts of divine spirits and phantoms, could do no wrong. If they lost that status by apologizing, they would instantly lose their influence and fall from that position.

Arcus turned to Eulid. “Lord Rain, how are the guards who were with us faring?”

“They received healing almost immediately, and so everybody who survived the encounter is still alive. They will be reinstated, so long as they make an

adequate recovery.”

Arcus nodded. The state of the rest of the imperial guard had been on his mind since he awoke. He knew that most of them had suffered severe wounds during the fighting, but it was a relief to know their lives were not in danger. He allowed himself a sigh of relief.

“Sir. It is nearly time,” Eulid said to Ceylan.

“Oh. It is later than I thought. I must go ahead to the capital; however, you should take as much time as you require for your recovery. I shall order the healers to keep treating you with extra care.”

“My gratitude knows no bounds, sir.”

Ceylan chuckled. “You seem to be running short of ways to express your gratitude.”

“Yes, sir. It frightens me to think I may have to resort to the same idiom twice.” Arcus joined in with the joke.

Ceylan’s tone suddenly changed, as did his attitude. The prince’s majesty started to weigh on Arcus all at once. “Arcus. Allow me to thank you once again.”

“Your words are wasted on me, sir.”

“You need not be humble. We would likely have fallen short of victory had you not been here.”

“I am just glad you are not hurt, sir.”

Again, Ceylan laughed. “Me too. I shall speak with you again soon.” He stood up. “Arcus. I look forward to counting on you again.”

“Thank you, sir. I shall work as hard as I can to meet your expectations.”

“And expect from you I shall.” Ceylan turned to Eido. “And you, Eido? Will you come with me?”

“I think I’ll stay with Arcus until he has recovered. I’ve caused him no end of trouble; it’s the least I can do.”

“Hm. You certainly are a serious man. But if that is what you wish, then I will

leave Arcus in your hands.” Ceylan gave a satisfied nod before stepping through the curtain with Eulid.

Oddly, Arcus felt as though he had not been as nervous around Ceylan as before.

Eulid stopped all of a sudden and turned to Cazzy. “Cazzy, have you thought about what we discussed?”

“Oh, that? Yeah, um, sorry, but I’ll have to pass.”

“I do not have to ask for your reasoning, I suppose. It is him, isn’t it?”

“I dunno how my master’ll mess up if I leave him alone, so yeah. I’m sorry.”

“It’s quite all right. I knew you would refuse. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” With that, Eulid was gone.

“What’s he talking about?” Arcus asked.

“He asked me to become a magician for the imperial guard after the battle on the plains. Said they didn’t have enough supporting magic users. I thought he was just sayin’ it to be nice, y’know?”

“I guess he was serious.”

“Sounds like it.”

When Arcus had split with Cazzy on the plains, he’d asked his servant to go and assist the imperial guard; it sounded like he had been helpful. Cazzy was indeed skilled when it came to supporting magic. Arcus doubted there were many in the kingdom who could match him.

“Are you sure you should’ve turned him down?”

“Are ya kiddin’? The imperial guard’s fulla stuffy nobles. I’m a commoner. I don’t wanna suffocate, thanks.”

“How peculiar,” said Noah. “You do realize you are surrounded by nobles, even in your current position?”

“You don’t think of us as nobles?” Arcus prompted.

“If ya want me to think of ya as a noble, you should act like one! Feels like I’m messin’ around in the Institute all over again.”

Arcus let out a lighthearted laugh.

As things calmed down, he was suddenly struck by Ceylan's words again.

"I look forward to counting on you again."

"He's gonna count on me...again? What does that mean?"

"What it sounds like, right?" said Craib.

"I would say so too," Eido agreed.

"Indeed," Noah said.

"You're one popular kid, huh?" Cazzy cackled.

It seemed that Arcus's future was set to become even busier.

Part 1: The Gazing Kings

The room was outsized by the standards of the military establishment—wide enough to accommodate tens of people, its high ceilings held up by thick pillars. Two large fireplaces were set deep within it.

In the room's four corners were metal fixtures engraved with seals to keep the room warm, and a golden chandelier hung from the ceiling, embedded with Sol Glasses imported from the kingdom. Sculptures of creatures described in the Ancient Chronicles stuck their heads out from the walls, and the prevailing color of each banner and tapestry was black.

A huge throne sat at the center of the room, three levels high, and on its back were crossed battle flags depicting three-headed snakes with glittering, violet eyes.

This was the throne room of the Eldyne Stronghold in the Northern Confederation's Darnénes Territory. It was currently occupied by one man and one woman. The woman sat on the throne, leaning her arm on the armrest and propping up her chin. The man stood one level below, carrying documents.

The woman was Meifa Darnénes, leader of the stronghold, known within and without the Confederation as the Iron Rose. She was only just in her twenties, and her features still had a childlike glint to them. Her wavy, dark blonde hair fell beneath her shoulders, and her purple eyes sparkled like amethysts in the exact same shade as the snakes behind her. Her delicate skin was snow-white, like it had never seen the sun, and she wore black gathered gloves and a black dress. Her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping; in truth, beneath her serene exterior, vast mental machinery churned.

The man was one of her subordinates—her eyes and ears for all matters of concern, both foreign and domestic. He looked frivolous for a confidant, like he found it a chore simply to stand there and lacked all motivation. His face was covered with stubble, and there were the beginnings of dark circles under his eyes. While he waited for Meifa to speak, he scratched at his head listlessly,

sending flakes of dandruff fluttering through the air.

“It would appear our plan failed,” Meifa remarked stiffly, her husky voice pleasant to the ears.

The man flicked through his documents at his own pace. “Indeed. Ceylan Crosellode noticed our plan the moment he was caught in Porque Nadar’s trap, went straight into Rustinell and put together his subjugation forces there. Then he...uh, one moment please...met Nadar’s army on the plains, won that fight, and...that’s about it.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s a good story, isn’t it? Maybe Ceylan was very lucky, or there was some unknown force involved, or maybe his victory was prearranged. Anyway, it was a flawless victory; almost suspiciously so. That comeback was praiseworthy indeed.” The man let out an undignified laugh.

Meifa sighed, sick to death of hearing variants of this same story. “I suppose the dust has settled now that everyone is calling it the natural outcome.”

“Would that mean Your Excellency foresaw all of this?”

“I did, yes. Not that they would detect the plan ahead of time and fall back, but a small-time noble who can’t bring himself to go any further than embezzlement or smuggling has no chance of defeating a Crosellode. Else Rihaltio or Barbaros would have captured the kingdom long ago.”

“What about the lion hidden within that horde of pigs?”

“If those leading the pack were mostly imperial soldiers, things would be different; the majority of them belonged to Nadar. Soldiers like that could never follow the lion’s directions perfectly. Pigs will always be pigs. There’s no beating a dragon for them, whether they ally themselves with a lion or not.”

“Ah, now that makes perfect sense.”

Meifa glared at him. He was a noble; he should have been able to see that much for himself.

“Is that all you came here to speak about? I fail to see how that warrants taking up my time.”

The man's expression softened, and his listlessness vanished. "No, there is more. Something unrelated which I would like you to hear, ma'am. Actually, this is the real reason I came to see you. Apparently, an incredibly powerful spell was witnessed on the plains."

"A spell? Magic is the kingdom's strong point. That doesn't sound particularly noteworthy to me."

"That spell apparently broke through the Empire's cutting-edge defensive magic with ease and wiped out the entire magical unit, including the cavalry."

"You mean to say it is a threat?"

"The way our spies speak of it, it is magic of unmatched ferocity. It conjured stones from aether that blew holes through the soldiers, their horses, and their armor."

"That sounds like the same type of magic you see everywhere."

Her confidant shook his head. "Our spies report that, if an entire troop were to use that horrifying spell, their opposition would be pulverized to the last in an instant. The arcane infantry division was torn apart fast enough as it is."

"Hm?"

Though he tried to explain the magnitude of the spell, it seemed Meifa was struggling to comprehend. The power of a spell was judged based on its appearance and range. It *did* sound like a powerful spell, but nothing that the stronger magicians in the Northern Confederation couldn't match.

It was hard to draw any conclusions when she didn't know how strong the new defensive spell used by the imperial troops was, but it sounded to her just like any spell the kingdom's state magicians might use—in fact, it would be stranger if they *hadn't* used such spells. She was having a hard time pinning down why her confidant seemed to think it so dangerous.

"This is serious," Meifa's subordinate pressed. "I've brought a magician who fought on Nadar's side." He signaled towards the room's entrance.

A single magician stepped into the throne room after a brief pause. When he had reached the confidant's side, he faced Meifa, took a knee, and bowed

deeply.

“So then, Magician. Describe for me the spell.”

“Yes, Your Excellency! It was an offensive spell which fired fist-sized black stones without pause. Most terrifying was its speed and penetrative strength. It broke through the defensive magic that even the kingdom’s staple Flamrune could not. The shield and the bodies of the magicians behind the barrier were full of holes, and—no, the magicians were completely torn apart.”

“A defensive spell that can hold up against Flamrune, you say? That sounds like a threat indeed.”

It wasn’t clear whether Meifa was referring to the defensive spell or the spell that penetrated it. Perhaps it was both.

Flamrune was Lainur’s offensive workhorse. Every magician in their army used it, so to have a spell capable of blocking it would put any belligerent opposed to them at an advantage. But according to this magician, said counter was already irrelevant.

Meifa’s dark blonde eyebrows twitched. She seemed more interested in this topic now than she had been a short while ago. “In terms of strength, the kingdom’s state magicians should be superior to its army—and yet you seem so frightened of this particular spell. Is there anything else adding to its threat?”

“Yes, ma’am, there is. While I’m uncertain of the details, it seemed this spell was frightfully economical. I believe even your average magician would hold enough aether to be able to use it.”

“Did you learn of the incantation? Would you be able to recreate the spell yourself?”

“My apologies, ma’am. We did not hear the incantation, and none of us were able to recreate those black stones.”

“I see.” Meifa turned her gaze from the magician back to her subordinate. “If what he says is true, we may well see this spell cast in formation soon enough. Supposing it really is more powerful than Flamrune, I agree it would be dangerous.”

“Yes, ma’am. Our forces have only just updated our defensive magic, and those reinforcements were based on the kingdom’s Flamrune and the Empire’s Burning Laughter. If we now have to go back in light of this new spell...” The confidant let out a deep, exhausted sigh. More information would be required to craft defensive magic capable of dealing with this new spell, and his head felt heavy enough as it was.

“Are we sure it’s a *new* spell?”

“We believe it to be a secret technique. Reports say it was only used by that specific magician, so it’s unlikely to be an official military spell.”

“Has the spell’s caster been identified?”

“Yes, ma’am. The name was, um... Yes, it was Arcus Raytheft.”

“Raytheft? From House Raytheft in the east? As I recall, that house lies under the authority of the Cremelia House.”

“Yes, ma’am. I am not sure what reasons a Raytheft would have for getting involved in the war, but there was no mistaking that silver hair and those red eyes.”

Meifa raised an eyebrow. “Silver hair and red eyes...”

“Yes, ma’am, those are features of the Raytheft family which have been passed down in the eastern part of the kingdom for generations. Some say they can be traced all the way back to *The Spiritual Age*.” The man waited for a response, but there was none. Meifa seemed to be deep in thought. “Ma’am? Is something the matter?”

“I heard there was some trouble involving a scheme concocted by a group of older men on a recent visit to Lainur.”

“Yes, I know the one. The one where they were trying to pick a fight with that sprite? It sounded suicidally foolish to me. Of course they failed.”

“A hex fiend appeared then.”

“...Huh?” The man’s jaw dropped and didn’t go back up at first, like he had dislocated it—but then he recovered and smiled faintly, like the subject of the conversation had shifted to matters of fiction. “Strange name for a creature,

isn't it? More than trouble, it sounds like it's got the power to destroy a whole country."

"There *was* a hex fiend."

"U-Um, begging your pardon, ma'am, but a creature like that would have annihilated Lainur's capital..."

"Yet it didn't. There was a magician who managed to put a stop to it before things went that far."

"A state magician?"

"What do you think, Lox? What have we just been speaking about?"

"Wait, not this Arcus Raytheft?!"

"It would appear so." Meifa nodded quietly.

Lox stared at her. "B-But ma'am..."

"He's too young?"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, when I checked... He's not much more than twelve."

"Yes... That would make sense, given his height at the time."

"What magic did he use to drive away the hex fiend, ma'am?"

"It was like...a pillar of light. It reminded me of the Light of the Heavens recorded in the Ancient Chronicles."

"One of the Ten Fables from the first Chronicle, yes? He'd be good enough to be a state magician with a spell like that..."

"Considering his age, there has to be some sort of trick to his skills somewhere." Meifa suddenly realized she knew very little about the boy herself. "Is this Arcus Raytheft the son of the Raythefts' head? Or is he a son of Crucible?"

"According to what I found, the main family has a son around his age."

"We can assume he will inherit the house, then."

"It's not quite that simple, ma'am."

"No?"

“This doesn’t make a lot of sense, but this Arcus boy was apparently disinherited by the main family.”

“A boy of his talents? Why? Even his servants are supposed to be highly skilled!”

“Accounts indicate that his aether fell short of the family’s standards.”

“Well, I do recall his servants mentioning something along those lines, but even then it sounds absurd!”

“Maybe, but such are the facts. I barely understand it myself.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense compared to what I saw! The magic he used must have required a substantial amount of aether.”

“Quite right, ma’am. If this boy is capable of recreating spells from the fables, then it’s simply impossible for him to have been disinherited for ‘lacking aether.’”

“Perhaps it is disinformation. They are concealing his real strength until he is old enough.”

“I thought so too, and so I looked into it, but the more I did, the more evidence came out that it’s all true.” Lox threw his hands in the air, a sign of surrender. “There’s something else. Nadar’s revolt was detected as early as it was because of this Arcus Raytheft. Ceylan himself apparently thanked the boy for his actions at his audience with the nobles, and even asked him to stay by his side on the battlefield.”

That was enough to make even Meifa visibly aghast. “What on earth is the Raytheft House thinking? Wasn’t the previous head of the Raytheft family mediocre as well?”

“They say Crucible was disinherited too. I suppose not only was he mediocre, but they failed to see his true potential. It’s a common tale among those who value aether above all else.” Lox turned around suddenly and glared at the pillar closest to the door. “Who’s there?” He focused his aura, sharp as a blade, towards the space behind it.

A moment passed, and then a solitary figure appeared: a young man in a tulip

hat. He wore a cloak and a large curved blade on his hip. On his back was a knapsack. His eyes were narrow as thread, and it was nigh on impossible to judge what he was thinking at first glance, a feature which only worked to make him more suspicious. He was grinning, completely unaffected by the hostility Lox threw at him.

His name was Gilles, a man acquainted with Arcus and his companions from a chance meeting in Rustinell.

Meifa turned her violet gaze towards him. "Gilles."

"Nice to see y'here as always, Ms. Meifa. How's things? All good?"

"I see your habit of showing up wherever you please hasn't changed."

"I'd prefer y'to call it bein' carefree. 'Specially when I said I was comin' 'n' all," Gilles said smugly, leaving Meifa with little room to respond as she'd like.

"Enough of your idle chatter."

"Oh, yikes. I think my balls are shrivelin' up." Gilles wrapped his arms around himself and shivered dramatically.

An eerie spark flashed across Meifa's violet eyes. Gilles's expression stiffened, and he hurriedly jumped out of the way.

"Uorgh!"

The floor just in front of his feet turned black as mill scale. The hardened black crackled and swelled slightly before freezing in place.

Gilles, who only just managed to escape it, peered down at the solidified mass. "Huh. Petrifyin' Iron, izzit, from the Ancient Chronicles? Bone-chillin'." He prodded at the floor with a curious toe. There was no fear in his actions, just admiration in his voice as he grumbled.

"What are you here for, Gilles?" Meifa asked.

"Nothin' in particular. Just heard y'guys were talkin' 'bout Arcus, but I kinda flubbed the timin' and ended up just kinda standin' there, y'know."

Lox scratched his head. "It's quite the bother for you to come in without permission."

Meifa narrowed her eyes. "You know about Arcus Raytheft?"

"Ran into him a while back, didn't I?"

"Oh yes?"

"What, yer curious now? Guess y'would be. Arcus is a real fascinatin' kid."

"Enough of that. Tell me about him."

"Y'hear 'bout the magicians in the kingdom gettin' all powered up lately?"

"Of course I have. It's the very reason I sent spies to Nadar's side."

"Oh yeah? Whatcha find out?"

Meifa looked to Lox, a signal for him to answer the question.

"We confirmed that the proficiency of the kingdom's magical troops had improved considerably compared to before."

"Thought so, yeah."

Lox shot Gilles a sharp look. "What has this got to do with Arcus Raytheft?"

"They say he's the one who made whatever it is makin' them magicians so strong. Not managed to dig out more than that."

"It's that tool of his, isn't it?"

Gilles's eyebrows shot up. "Y'know somethin'?"

"I know there is a tool of some kind. I did not know who made it, and I certainly did not expect it to be *him*."

"I gotcha. Guess y'got this story pinned down more than I have."

"I should like to know where you came across this information."

"Now there's a question. Y'know the secrets I keep cost way more than my wares." Gilles guffawed, sidestepping Lox's inquiry.

"I would like more information, Gilles. How much?"

"Sorry, lady. This info ain't for sale."

"Are you sure? You would be making quite the profit."

"Yeah, I know. But Arcus is my best bud, y'know? 'N' my heart's pure as the

melted snow up on the Cross Mountains. 'S no way I'm gonna rat him out!"

"You've already told us quite enough that I believe it counts as 'ratting him out.'"

"Naw, this much's fine."

"I wonder about that."

"I just came to tell y'this stuff 'cause y'always treat me so nice. Didn't seem to faze y'much, though."

Meifa let out a noncommittal hum.

"Welp, me 'n' Arcus're gonna go get fired up in some business negotiations." Gilles rearranged his knapsack and hopped once. Waving at the pair, he opened the door to the throne room and slipped out.

"Send a messenger to the Kingdom's order ceremony as planned. Give them a letter and a gift to congratulate them for their victory."

"Yes, ma'am."

Meifa rested her head on her hand once more, and closed her eyes as though drifting off to sleep.

The central throne room was awash with dazzling color. Jewelry set with gold and silver gemstones covered every surface, the carpet was woven with high-grade fabric from the maritime nation of Granciel, and a sheer silk veil hung down from the ceiling, acting as a partitioning curtain. The potted plants—pineapple-like specimens imported from the southern Hanai Archipelago—lent an exotic air to the room, and stones mounted with iridescent crystals limned the silhouettes in the room with wavering light. Mysterious aromas rose up from oil lamps, adding to the fantastical atmosphere that enveloped the whole room. For a throne room, it was almost *too* splendidous—the whole place lacked majesty.

A throne room was supposed to exude the authority of its nation or kingdom, and while there was a red battle flag hung up on the wall, rather than a throne, the dais held a large couch placed on top of the pelt of a beast considered rare

in every corner of the world.

It would not be an exaggeration to say this room was a display of every conceivable extravagance. It said that there was no treasure and no great feat beyond the owner's means.

An incredibly slender man sat on the couch. His uncanny figure took hold of the untrained eye before his air of sagacity could register. However, it was not due to illness or poor health. His body was full of vitality, and his eyes were constantly alight with a silver glow, like the glittering reflection of a blade. A white silk cloak and golden bracelets and necklaces adorned his body, and he wore sandals on his feet. His fingers were slender, almost feminine, and his skin was like a porcelain doll's. His evenly cut blond hair was set with a laurel wreath, and his features were as cherubic as a young teenage boy's; the dignity radiating from him was anything but.

This was the imperial chamber in the Hazes Palace of Aurela, the Gillis Empire's capital city. It was where Leon Grantz, of the eastern field army, stood before Emperor Rihaltio Gilrandy.

Rihaltio leaned back on the couch, softly stroking a white tiger cub; his silver eyes remained locked on Leon. The general had just finished giving his report on the battle with Nadar.

Only now did Rihaltio's lips crack open. "You lost? I never thought I'd see the Ever Victorious General suffer defeat at the hands of that dragon's whelp."

"I cannot apologize enough, Your Excellency, for squandering the permission we had to attack." Leon, already on one knee, bowed his head even more deeply.

The bald man at Rihaltio's side raised his voice to a shout. "You think an apology will smooth things over?! Your request was excessive to start with, and not only did your assault fail, you lost half our magical troops—troops we had only just finished training!"

"That is true. I have no excuse. If His Excellency wills it, I am more than ready to give up my head."

"As you should be! You ought to be prepared for the worst of sentences and

—”

“Hold on a moment!” said the man next to Leon, interrupting the chancellor’s stream of abuse.

He was Bague Gruba of the Empire’s central forces, a man large enough that you would strain your neck looking up at him. His chin was covered in hair, and the sides of his head with thick sideburns. The fuzz on his face made him look just like a raging bull.

This was the mighty warrior who had come within a hair’s breadth of clashing with Arcus and Ceylan on the Mildoor Plains.

He sat cross-legged, despite being in the presence of the Emperor, and stared at the chancellor, whose eyes were wrenched wide open.

Bague pointed to himself. “Chancellor. If you want to punish Leon, you should punish me too.”

“Wh-Why you...”

“I’m right, though, aren’t I? If he’s taking responsibility for this loss, then so should I. I’m a general just like him!”

Though Bague was the one offering himself up for punishment, the chancellor was the one gnashing his teeth. He shouldn’t have been letting somebody he outranked push him around like this.

“Leave it, Bague.”

“But Leon—”

“Leave it.”

Bague had been leaning in towards the chancellor before Leon’s words pulled him back.

Rihaltio finally spoke. “My chancellor.”

“Sir.”

“I will forgive this failure.”

“If I may offer my opinion, sir...”

“Yes, my chancellor. Speak.”

“Sir, leaving this blunder unpunished goes against the principle of sure punishment or reward. General Grantz must be sentenced to maintain your authority.”

“Hmm... A punishment...”

“Yes, sir.”

Rihaltio took barely any time for thought before speaking again. “This particular situation does not necessitate a punishment. My priorities in this fight were testing our new magic and gathering information on the kingdom’s magicians. Both those objectives were fulfilled without trouble. Therefore, one might say our plan was a success.”

“But we lost the majority of the magicians we taught the Silver Heralds of the Dawn’s magic. Isn’t that a devastating loss?”

“We have a viscount learning that new magic. And that was not the fault of Leon. Yes?”

“Yes, sir, he has already been taught.”

“Very good. Now we need only to teach it to more of our magicians. As for the result of the war, we need only put it down to the dragon’s whelp’s skill, something that was evident from the way he gathered his troops. We have seen the measure of his ability, and that is enough for the time being. The best we could have hoped for, in fact, for the only real losses were suffered by the other side.”

Looking purely at results, the war resulted in little else than the kingdom weeding out and eliminating the allies who had betrayed it. While the Empire had lost some magicians and its Black Panther Cavalry, it still had swathes of personnel. Such a loss was no wound, nor even a scratch.

“Furthermore,” the Emperor continued, “if I am to punish my lion, it follows that I must punish everyone who failed to invade the kingdom. It is not my desire to delve back into that which has already been dealt with.”

“Sir, what if Lainur criticizes us for dispatching troops on this occasion?”

“I am not concerned about that. Dyssea and Porque Nadar had a contract. You may tell any messenger that Dyssea dispatched troops according to that contract, and that we were unaware of it.”

“So the blame will be placed entirely at Dyssea’s feet? What of his family?” Leon asked.

“They make fine scapegoats. We shall take their heads and send them to Shinlu.”

Rihaltio’s levelheaded words pushed Leon into silence. The merciless command weighed heavily on his chest. He knew what that young general had been fighting for.

The Emperor mistook Leon’s concern for another. “There is nothing to fear, my lion. Lainur hasn’t the mettle to send any troops beyond its borders now. Can you see that?”

Leon paused. “Yes, sir.” He nodded.

Those words were, however, unfit for the ears of the dead.

The Emperor was made of smoke and mirrors.

Those words suddenly popped into Leon’s head. It was a common insult, heard within and without the Empire. The Emperor had no sympathy for others. No sympathy meant no blood. It was smoke that ran through his veins, void of feeling.

“Sir, there is no guarantee of that. We may have failed in eliminating Ceylan, but that does not mean the kingdom won’t come seeking revenge,” the chancellor said.

“My lion has made sure they won’t. Tell him.”

“Yes, sir. While this is likely to plunge us into war with the kingdom, such a war would be nothing more than a skirmish, with very little risk of developing into something major.”

“Interesting,” Rihaltio said. “Shinlu has to keep up his image, both in the kingdom and outside. However, I am sure he does not want a major conflict any more than I do.”

Especially when he had his hands full with revolting nobles on the borders of his own country. It would take effort for Lainur to rein in its gentry—far too much for it to launch a large-scale war of retaliation. If it was going to pick a fight, it would be a small one. Either way, the outcome was predictable. If neither side wanted a war, the quarrel would inevitably fizzle out by itself—assuming, of course, that both leaders acted rationally.

“Chancellor. Shinlu is not the kind of man to let his emotions lead him into a war. And if he were foolish enough to start a war he couldn’t win, he would already be under my command.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Even if we had killed Ceylan, the same would hold true, without question. That man knows tactics.”

It took more than the unity of soldiers and generals to go to war. It took the unity of your entire country. When it came to war, both luck and the positional advantage were impossible to engineer, whether you relied on the human spirit, or on an army’s unity. That was out of a leader’s control. *People* were.

The kingdom would only be able to bring its full force to a war after placing its nobles in check and confirming their intentions. The country had no unity at present, and so it could not make use of its military.

An official entered the room, took a knee, and bowed deeply.

“What is it?”

“I have a report, Your Excellency. His Royal Highness, the crown prince, has returned home.”

The door to the throne room swung open, and a boy with the same golden hair as Rihaltio entered. A crowd of attendants followed him as he stepped lightly in front of the Emperor. He looked to be in his late teens, and his features were similar enough to Rihaltio’s that one might mistake them for brothers; the only difference was in the outer corners of the eyes. They turned down slightly on the boy’s face, giving it a softer appearance.

Deciding which was the elder brother based on looks was a difficult task, but in actuality, this boy was Rihaltio’s son. He was Gillis Empire’s crown prince:

Ernest Gilrandy.

Ernest entered the room with a pretentious bow before approaching the dais, taking a knee, and dipping his head low.

“Crown Prince Ernest, returned from northern Dunbarroude.”

“Welcome back, my son.”

“It has been a long time, Your Excellency.”

“Hm.”

Ernest surveyed the chamber. “It was my intention to inform you of my return at once...but have I perhaps interrupted something?”

“Not at all.”

“What were you discussing?”

“My lion was delivering his report on our plan in the east.”

“The east? You mean Lainur?”

“Correct.”

Ernest closed his eyes thoughtfully for a moment. “There is no advantage to our picking a fight with the kingdom at this time. Was this perhaps a secret plan?”

Rihaltio didn’t answer.

It didn’t seem to faze Ernest—perhaps he was used to his father’s way—who instead turned to peer at Leon. “You seem more docile than I am used to, lion. This situation must be an unusual one for you as well.”

“I am deeply ashamed.”

“There is no need for that. Wars can be won, lost, or end in a stalemate. It need not be more complicated than that. Despite the outcome, I trust you came away relatively unscathed?”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness.”

“I thought as much.” Ernest responded with a satisfied nod.

“My son.”

“Sir?”

“Your report.”

“Yes, sir. Northern Dunbarroude surrendered to our army.”

“Good. As expected,” Rihaltio said.

Ernest seemed dissatisfied with his father’s response. “Sir, seeing as I won...I wondered if I might receive a word of praise.”

“My son. Praise is only suited for one who has achieved beyond his usual capabilities. It is unnecessary for me to praise you for each and every deed.”

Ernest shrugged and shook his head with an exaggerated sigh. “I suppose I ought simply to be happy that you place so much trust in me.”

Though he was the Emperor’s son, to act in such a casual manner before him in a public setting was less than commendable. Yet nobody called him out on it, because they knew the kind of relationship he had with his father.

“My son, how are the soldiers?”

Ernest scratched at his cheek. “Well... They have lost themselves to copious amounts of alcohol in celebration of their victory.”

“The invasion of Dunbarroude was a long campaign. Make sure the soldiers stationed there remain on guard, before they start longing for home. They may have surrendered, but the situation may well be reversed should their survivors find the willpower to rebel. I will accept no mistakes.”

“As you wish, sir.” Ernest bowed, the motion again exaggerated.

“All that is left now is Maydalia, yes?”

“Yes, sir. I expect their resistance is set to become even fiercer.”

“Annihilation, then. Know that there will be a difference in how we treat the surrendered Dunbarroude and Maydalia.”

“Then it sounds like this conflict will last quite a while.”

“No matter. We will need sufficient preparation time for our fight with Lainur in any case. The kingdom is not so soft that we can safely balance it against a war on another front.”

“Indeed. The kingdom has its state magicians, its ten monarchs, and a number of regional lords besides. It will not be an easy battle.”

Rihaltio paused in stroking his tiger cub, as if a thought had struck him, and turned his gaze to Leon. “My lion. Was it indeed Ceylan who defeated Dyssea?”

“Yes, sir. However...”

“However?”

“Aluas reported that the victory was thanks to an enormous effort by an attendant of the prince.”

“An attendant?”

“Yes, sir. Aside from his guard, Ceylan was accompanied by a silver-haired boy. One who worked to protect the prince to the bitter end, while ignoring the danger to his own life.”

Rihaltio let out an interested hum.

Bargue felt he knew who Leon was referring to. He slapped his knee as the memory came back to him. “Ooh! That young warrior! Yes, yes! We cannot underestimate the young!”

“Oh?” The Emperor leaned forwards. “It is rare for anybody to leave an impression on *you*.”

“Yes, sir! I was chasing down Ceylan and his guard, when that boy stood in my way! He even managed to *hurt* me! No one but a state magician has stung me like that in an age.”

“He hurt *you*?”

“Yes, sir. I remember him well, because he looked to be as young as Ceylan.”

“That’s absurd!” the chancellor cried. “The same age as Ceylan? You mean to say this boy was ten years old—or thereabouts?”

“Dyssea and the elite Black Panther Cavalry comprised twenty men,” Leon said. “Despite Ceylan’s presence, this boy defeated almost all of them single-handedly. Even Aluas, one of Megas’s most gifted disciples, admitted to his brilliance.”

“Impossible...” But the chancellor could say nothing else. Magician or not, the idea of such a young boy defeating the Empire’s most elite soldiers was utterly incomprehensible to him.

The Emperor’s eyes softened. “It seems our hatchling has found himself quite the extraordinary weapon. What is this boy’s name?”

“According to Aluas, it is Arcus Raytheft, sir.”

“Raytheft. A famous military house of Lainur, as I recall.”

“Crucible—Craib Abend—is also of the Raytheft House, though he absconded.”

Rihaltio nodded and closed his eyes tightly, as though he was falling into careful thought.

The throne room was packed with treasure, brought in from the treasury. Every type of precious item imaginable had been strewn about: gold, silver, gems, coral, pearls, knives, and more. Brilliant reflections of silver and gold flashed in every corner of the room, temporarily blinding the people who stepped inside. The arrangement reeked of insecurity and tasteless indulgence.

It suited the man who put it all together perfectly. Proof of his insatiable, omnivorous exploits in thievery.

There was a man sitting on the magnificent throne. “Large” was the first word that came to mind at the sight of him, until the perspective fully registered, and then a mind was forced to page through its lexicon in search of a suitably preposterous synonym—enormous, colossal, *Brobdignagian*.

His name was Barbaros zan Grandon, a mysterious man who Arcus had met in a tavern in Lainur’s capital. He was the king of the maritime nation of Granciel, which lay south of Lainur. He was slouched in his throne, smirking at the man before him—the man Barbaros had ousted from the very seat he now warmed.

“Our long fight’s finally come to an end. Things ended up just like I said, huh?”

After a long pause, the man finally conceded, his head hanging. “Yes.”

Barbaros’s words echoed through his mind on an endless loop. These words,

and his earlier words too:

“I’m gonna win.”

“You can’t defeat me.”

Neither had been incorrect.

The defeated man’s name was Vapor Alsace, king of Zeilner. The battle between Granciel and Zeilner began several years ago, and even after Barbaros captured the capital, Vapor fled to his home region and continued to put up a resistance. In the end, however, he fought alone. There was no hope of reinforcements from other nations, and no way to break the deadlock. It was always going to be a simple matter of time before he found himself plucked from his throne like this.

Vapor looked up at Barbaros. “A question, King Barbaros.”

“Hmh? Go ahead.”

“Why aren’t you going to kill me?”

“It’d be a waste, that’s why. You put a lotta work into resisting me. Gave me a lotta trouble—to kill you now’d be a cryin’ shame. Then there’s that promise I made before we started fightin’.”

“It was nothing so noble as a promise.”

“Course it was; I was serious. I wanted you to surrender to me if I won.”

Vapor said nothing. Barbaros’s words were still unexpected to him. At the time, he’d thought them a joke; he could hardly believe Barbaros had meant it.

Seeing Vapor’s expression, Barbaros’s own twisted into a sneer, like a demon sealing a pact with a man for whom the one-sidedness of the deal was only beginning to register. “Well? Are you gonna submit? Or do you want me to kill your whole family and all your followers?”

“Even if I submit, who is to say you won’t betray me anyway?”

Barbaros guffawed. “Of course you’re gonna get betrayed. You’re a king; you’re ’sposed to accept that sorta risk. Or am I wrong? I lead a crew of sailors. I gotta have some way to convince ’em I’m worth followin’.”

Vapor realized he had two extreme options before him now: submission, or death for him and everyone close to him. In fact, calling them “options” was generous.

“All right. Your Majesty, Barbaros zan Grandon. I will follow you.”

“Nice! Guess that’s settled then! Someone get me some drink!” Barbaros cried out, summoning his deputy chief of protocol, who came carrying a simple cup. It was long-worn, its lip splintered and cracked, its appearance completely at odds with the rest of the room’s treasures. Its condition was a testament to the countless agreements that Barbaros had exchanged, just like this one.

Barbaros took the cup, allowed it to be filled with wine, took a sip, and then passed down the now near-empty vessel to Vapor. Vapor raised it once, as if in thanks, and put it to his lips. For a king to have to drink from that cup must have been humiliating.

Barbaros laughed. “Come on, no need to look like that. As long as you’re on my ship, you’re one of my own. I’m not gonna let any harm come to you. You might feel bad now, but once you’re laughin’ along with the boys on my ship, you’ll forget this ever happened!”

One of Barbaros’s crewmen burst into the room then, gasping for breath.

“Captain! I have a report!”

“And you gotta shout about it, do you? What is it?”

“The conflict with Lainur has been settled.”

Naturally, Barbaros had also heard of the war with Nadar. In fact, he had known long before anybody else, for Lainur was the crown jewel of his future collection.

“Got it. I knew it’d be easy for that pipsqueak, seein’ who his old man is. Unless you’re gonna tell me he lost to some pissant lord?”

“No, sir! As you predicted, Ceylan’s army won the battle.”

“Knew it! To think the kid’s got his first victory at twelve, or thirteen... That’s somethin’ to be proud of. Lookin’ forward to the scrap waiting for me over there.” Barbaros let out a hearty guffaw. His face was unexpectedly alight with

joy at the news of an enemy nation's victory.

"I also have a report about that shrimpy strategist who helped you concoct that plan before, sir."

"Arcus, hmm? What's he gone and done this time?" Barbaros leaned forward.

"They said he played a key role—even served on the war council."

"Huh? Ha ha ha! This war was in the west, right? That kid never stops makin' me laugh! And?"

"He apparently saw right through Nadar's plan, and cemented the kingdom's upper hand in the fray."

"You're kiddin'?"

"No, sir, it's true! All our spies've been saying the same thing."

"Right... Yup. I need to make that kid my personal strategist," Barbaros muttered to himself, leaning back to look at the ceiling. It was like a pitched game of battle chess played out overhead for only him to see, his every move meticulously considered. Had Arcus been here, he would have accused the captain of counting his chickens before they'd hatched.

In response to Barbaros's jubilant mood, Vapor sounded somewhat exasperated as he said, "Are you planning to capture somebody else now?"

"I sure am. We're talkin' about the strategist who taught me the trick to capturing this stronghold. To you he's probably just some demon who brought your demise though!" Barbaros guffawed.

"This strategist must have put a lot of thought into all of this."

"Nah, I don't think he did, actually. It was more like...instinct, y'know? Like he'd seen the exact same stalemate before."

"So he was following precedent?"

"Let's say it was as convincin' as if he was. When I heard what he had to say, suddenly I thought there was no other way forwards." As though an idea had suddenly struck him, Barbaros looked back at the throne. "Hey."

"What is it, Captain?"

“I wanna give Arcus some cash and treasure. Bring him everythin’ in this room.”

“What, *all* of it? Are you sure, sir?”

“Sure I’m sure. It was his plan that led us to victory, right? And you know our mantra.”

“Equal spoils for all.”

“You got it. We’ve already got plenty of treasure. Even givin’ him all the stuff in here ain’t enough to make it fair.”

“Ha ha ha! You’re as heroic as always, Captain!” the crewman called joyfully before he set to work. He summoned his own henchmen to start planning how to transport the treasure, and soon the throne room was alive with activity.

“It’s not gonna be a victory for the kingdom. It’s gonna be a victory for Arcus Raytheft.”

“What? Why?”

“Vapor, my crewmate’s a few marbles short. Mind enlightenin’ him?” Barbaros said, as if giving Vapor his first job as a new subordinate.

“It’s a way to sow discord. It encourages alienation by diverting suspicion onto one from a different nation.”

“Huh, really?”

“Kinda off-puttin’ for a victory to go to the followers instead of the royal family, right? Makes people think there’s somethin’ more goin’ on behind the scenes. In time the followers’ll get sick of the cold shoulder treatment, and start wantin’ to cut ’emselves off,” Barbaros explained, his features twisting fiendishly. If Arcus were here, he’d likely yell about Barbaros trying to push the same fate as Minamoto no Yoshitsune onto him.

Barbaros’s crewmate stuck out his tongue. “You’re as devilish as always, Captain!”

“Ha ha ha! I sure am! Who d’you think you’re talkin’ to?” Barbaros laughed heartily.

The captain himself knew Arcus would not be swayed by what he was trying to do. He was as honest as his upbringing was depressing. He wouldn't be pushed to betray those around him without some *very* powerful persuasion.

“Gettin’ the finest treasures handed to you on a plate is borin’ anyway. Arcus. I hope you and Shinlu’s kid are lookin’ forward to entertainin’ me...”

Barbaros punctuated his words with a final guffaw.

Roughly two weeks had passed since the war in Nadar’s territory. Ceylan made his triumphant return to Lainur’s capital accompanied by his imperial guard, with his first military victory—an overwhelming one, no less—under his belt. His subjects thronged the capital’s main street to celebrate his achievements.

So it went in the chronicles detailing the royal family’s activities. Ceylan was, naturally, the talk of the town when he came back. They spoke of his spectacular dispatch of the cowardly, depraved noble, his hands befouled by his treason. Word abounded of his courageous feats scoring head after head on the front line, and his august, inviolable authority over his lords, bending them to a strategy beyond belief. Etcetera, etcetera.

There was even a tale of how he split the earth in twain with a single sword strike, slaughtering over a thousand enemies with the royal family’s magic. Whether from bias or the simple effect of being retold multiple times, the story had now been blown far, far out of every conceivable proportion. The common point of every version was that Ceylan was the hero. Books and plays were already being written based on his valiant deeds.

Louise’s fame had also grown massively after her achievements on the battlefield, while Count Bowe was punished for deserting the troops and inflicting harm on his allies. Having encountered Bague Gruba himself, Arcus couldn’t help but feel *a little* sorry for the count, but it was what it was—military nobles were rewarded for their wartime efforts. To reject the fight as it unfolded before one’s eyes was to abandon that truth.

Arcus followed Ceylan’s triumphant return to the capital a week later, once he was finished with his treatment and rest at the fortress city of Nalvarond.

Currently, he sat with Craib in an antechamber in Lainur's castle, waiting for an audience.

Craib had called on him almost the second he was back.

"His Majesty really wants to see you."

So here Arcus was, waiting to meet both King Shinlu Crosellode and his son. He was suitably and traditionally dressed for the occasion, in keeping with his noble roots. His lower garments consisted of shorts, high socks, and sock garters. The high-laced boots on his feet were meticulously polished until they shone like black pearls, and on his top half he wore a jacket and shirt, with a thin ribbon around the collar.

Around his shoulders was a borrowed indigo cloak embedded with dazzling ornaments. Beneath it hung his left arm, which still refused to move. He carried a case containing a certain document in the remaining hand.

Despite his attire, he felt like a rusty tin man as he waited to meet the king for the first time. Nerves stiffened his joints, and they refused to move as he wanted them to. It took considerable effort just to lift a single finger.

Craib, meanwhile, seemed as relaxed as ever. He puffed crudely on the cigar between his teeth, flipping through the volume of the Ancient Chronicles in his hands.

Arcus looked up at his uncle timidly. "U-U-Uncle? A-Am I going to mess up?"

"Huh? Mess what up?"

"The audience..."

"Nah, you'll be fine. There's nothin' to worry about."

"But..."

Craib's words did nothing to alleviate the nervous pangs in Arcus's stomach. He felt a hundred times more anxious than he did before his audience with Ceylan in Nalvarond, which was bad enough. This time he was meeting the most powerful man in the entire country. There was no telling what might happen if he didn't monitor every single one of his own movements. Not to mention he was a low-ranking noble, and a disinherited one at that. He might as

well have been a commoner compared to the king.

If they had crossed each other's paths by coincidence, maybe he could have dealt with it, but this was a formal meeting—something that by all rights should have been impossible considering Arcus's status.

"He's not some monster who's gonna rip you apart the second he sets his eye on you."

"I know that... His Majesty isn't the type to punish his subject on a whim...right?"

"I've never seen him do that. He does like to throw around threats of beheadin' a lot, though."

"Be-Be-Be..."

"Yeah."

As he recalled, Mercuria—one of the state magicians—had mentioned something about beheadings at the session of the Magician's Guild when he'd presented his aethometer. Perhaps the king really was fond of them.

Arcus leapt up from the couch. "Let's go home and return another day, uncle!"

"That's one of the rudest things you can do, dumbass."

"I'd rather keep my head. It's a matter of life or death."

"You and everyone else. Sit down."

"I honestly think my stomach is devouring itself."

"Let it. Sometimes you gotta learn to let things go."

"I need my stomach to live as much as I need my head!" Arcus wailed.

One of the castle's official servants entered the room then. "His Majesty is ready for you. Please, right this way."

Arcus felt his stomach drop as he watched the servant go on ahead. "Here we go..."

Craib rolled his eyes. "Y'knew this was gonna happen someday. If you ain't

prepared now, it's your own fault."

"I didn't think it would happen so *soon*."

"Aren't you the one always sayin' you never know what's gonna happen, so always be prepared?"

"I didn't have enough time to prepare. I'm just a kid."

"Why don't you act like one then?"

Arcus threw his hands into the air. "I'm Arcus Wayfweft, and I'm twelve!" His joke was met with a strike to the back of his head. "Uncle, that hurt."

"Serves you right for messin' around." Craib sighed.

Arcus had to admit, he might have taken the joke a bit too far this time—but if he hadn't, he feared the stress and pressure would overwhelm him. It would have been nice of his uncle to overlook a little bit of eccentric excitement.

"Let's go."

Craib and Arcus left the antechamber, bound for King Shinlu's throne room. Craib had his military jacket hanging from his shoulders as usual. He walked through the palace hallways completely undaunted. Arcus found it reassuring. On their way they passed both nobles and government officials, as well as noble military officers, all of whom bowed their heads in respect—such was the majesty of a state magician, especially in a country where magic was so revered.

That reverence was the same reason nobles of little aether were looked down upon.

Arcus followed behind his uncle, poking his head around his back to see the way. Eventually they arrived at a room located at the end of the hallway.

Arcus had always pictured throne rooms as bright places; this one defied expectations. The ceiling stretched high above like a star-studded sky, perhaps an illusion created by that darkness. A decorative stream bordered one side of the room, illuminated in blue by the Sol Glasses beneath; yet more indirect lighting dotted the whole space. The design seemed to prioritize style over the usual majesty required of a throne room. Arcus was suddenly reminded of a

theme park, particularly those attractions which conveyed narratives.

Despite its idiosyncrasies, it was a throne room nonetheless—at the far end of the room, the floor broke up into many layered tiers, rising far higher than the impromptu abode built for Ceylan in Nalvarond; there was a considerable distance between the base of the dais and the throne. A bamboo blind separated the upper level, barely hinting at the existence of the throne behind it. Its seat was red and hemmed with golden thread, identical to the typical image anyone would have of a throne. It was undeniably at odds with the rest of the room's design, which Arcus put down to the peculiarities of the royal family's origin.

There was somebody already waiting in the throne room when Arcus and Craib entered. He was taking a knee in the spot where one would wait for their audience with the king, deathly still and silent. The man resembled a statue, carved to precise specifications.

Arcus made to call out to the familiar face, but was quickly stopped by Craib. There were rules to follow here; he and Craib stooped down on one knee at the bottom of the dais. Then, Arcus lowered his head to avoid looking directly in front of him.

“Announcing the arrival of His Majesty and His Royal Highness.”

A voice rang out above their heads, and the next second Arcus sensed the presence of two figures beyond the bamboo blind: Lainur's king, Shinlu Crosellode, and his son, Prince Ceylan. After them came the imperial guard, entering from a side door and led by Eulid Rain.

A gong sounded through the once-silent room, its dignified tone spreading out and leaving long notes. Only when they dissipated did the room fall into stillness once more. Next, a piercing pressure burst forth from above. Arcus interpreted it as Shinlu's gaze, picking him over top to bottom. It was similar to the one Ceylan had cast upon him but, needless to say, the majesty exuding from this pair of eyes was much greater.

“You may raise your heads. Both of you.”

In keeping with formality, Arcus ignored the order until it came again: “Raise your heads.”

It was then that he saw a man seated on the throne. Arcus couldn't make out his face because of the blind, but he could see the man's long, golden hair shining in the faint light, and his chest, outlined by an unbuttoned shirt. He seemed rather unkempt from Arcus's perspective.



“You’re Arcus?” Shinlu asked.

“I-It is a pleasure to make Your Majesty’s acquaintance. I am Arcus Raytheft, eldest son of the Raytheft House. I am here in accordance with Your Majesty’s summons.”

“You know how to greet royalty. That means you’ve passed the first test.”

Arcus let out a mental sigh of relief. The first impression was always going to be tough, and to hear that he hadn’t messed up was a weight off his shoulders.

“Your face is as feminine as they say.”

“Wh—Um, yes sir...”

Shinlu chuckled. “Well, I didn’t call you here for a chat. You impressed me with your aethometer, but even then I never expected you to be so competent on the battlefield. You did well.”

“Yes, sir! I am extremely delighted by Your Majesty’s praise.”

“Make sure you keep up the hard work.”

“I shall continue to give everything of what little I have in service to the country, and Your Majesty’s family.” Arcus left a pause to allow Shinlu to continue on the topic of his aethometer and the war if he so desired—but he didn’t. “And, this!”

Arcus passed the document he brought to one of the imperial guards. The guard took it (Arcus had already discussed his plan with them in advance), and carried it to Shinlu.

Shinlu flipped the document over and back again. “What is this?”

“It describes a technique that could block the royal magic that was used during the conflict.”

“This is in accordance with the notice I received recently, is it?”

“Yes, sir.”

It was imperative that Arcus submit the documents on his insulation and nonconduction magic to the royal family. The family’s magic—lightning magic—was a secret royal art. It was strictly forbidden for the kingdom’s magicians to

research it, and any who tried were punished without exception. In Arcus's case, his seals were something he developed solely with the man's knowledge, so he shouldn't have been at risk of punishment—but as long as he was witnessed defending himself from lightning magic, he was obliged to advocate for himself. He had Craib inform the palace in advance that he was going to submit these documents to them.

Shinlu flipped through and scanned the pages of the document. "I see. This describes seals which can indirectly defend against our magic..."

"The seals require the use of the objects listed in the document, and cannot block the more powerful spells."

"Does this mean you are aware of the exact nature of our magic?"

"I am afraid so, sir."

"Did you tell him, Craib?"

"No, sir," said Craib. "I know little of it myself."

"Indeed, I didn't think so. In that case, Arcus, where did you gain this knowledge?"

An oppressive majesty pulled the air taut the moment Shinlu voiced his question, no doubt caused by the king himself. Arcus felt the cold penetrate right to his core. A crackling dryness spread over his skin, creating a tearing sensation. Arcus had been subject to the auras of several people, but never one that elicited such a tangible reaction.

A wrong answer here would mean the end of the line.

While his body and mind threatened to be ripped apart, Arcus spoke his prepared answer as deliberately as he could. "I research natural phenomena as a part of my magical studies. The royal magic just happens to be identical to one of the phenomena I have looked into."

"Oh? I *am* curious to know how exactly you studied up on the nature of said phenomenon."

This inquiry was less easy to answer.

While Arcus hesitated, Shinlu held up the papers. "No matter. It is

commendable that you brought these to me right away, so I will let you off the hook. But know that you are forbidden from researching that particular phenomenon without permission from now on. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir!”

The king was strict indeed—though Arcus supposed he had come dangerously close to stepping into taboo territory. That he wasn’t currently awaiting beheading even showed some compassion on Shinlu’s part. Perhaps it was Arcus’s development of the aethometer that saved him this time around.

Shinlu started scanning the documents again. “The nature of the phenomenon... Relation to magnetism... This is interesting indeed. Take a look at this.”

“Yes, it is highly fascinating.”

“Perhaps we ought to do some experimenting of our own in regards to this point...”

“Father, might I examine this document at length later?”

“Of course.”

The father and son chatted excitedly about Arcus’s findings. The two of them seemed very close.

Once they finished, the room suddenly turned cold. Shinlu was releasing his aura again. Arcus fumbled around in his head for why that chilly gaze was turned on him once more, but the answer was given to him before he could find it.

“There is something I would like to discuss with you regarding one of your efforts in the war.”

“Yes, sir. I am listening.”

“You protected Ceylan from one of the Empire’s commanders. I would like to erase that feat.”

“F-Father?!” Ceylan gasped; apparently this was the first he was hearing of this.

Craib, meanwhile, said nothing. These were the words of the king he put his faith in. Shinlu's request would have to be outrageous for him to raise an objection.

Shinlu ignored his son's confusion, his tone now firmer. "Do you accept?"

The king was resting his chin on one hand, his elbow propped on the armrest of his throne. His gaze cut through Arcus, steely and gelid, seeming to dissect him where he stood. The man held the quiet dignity required of Lainur's king, and a powerful aura that physically struck Arcus to his core. Every mover and shaker in this world had their own unique, overpowering aura; it was getting difficult to keep up.

"Father," Ceylan spoke up. "May I ask a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Arcus sacrificed his left arm in order to save me. I cannot comprehend the sense in erasing his deed."

"You wish to know the reason?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"If the story goes that you, Lan, drove the enemy off alone, our family's reputation will increase. Not only did you destroy the opposing army in your first campaign, you even cut down a commander and his imperial unit mid-ambush. You understand the impact that would have on our name, yes?"

"But what of Arcus's efforts?"

"Indeed, it is forbidden to claim the work of a servant as your own. However, nothing is forbidden for a Crosellode," Shinlu said. "Our kingdom is still in a period of unrest. The Empire's influence grows each passing year; already they have seized Fort Cassa, a strategic stronghold from my father's time. To the outside world, it seems that the power of our vassal states is drawing closer to our own. I am sure you understand how advantageous it would be to show that our power has grown."

"I..." It was clear Ceylan understood his father's logic, else he wouldn't be faltering.

“There is such a thing as attributing too many achievements. If we announce all that Arcus has managed, they may equal your own.”

Shinlu had a point. Not only did Arcus defeat Dyssea, but his Black Panther Cavalry too. Then there was his identification of Nadar’s trap before the war, and his successes at the warehouse where he and Deet traveled to gather information. He even scored himself an enemy head during the fighting. Not only were his achievements plentiful, he was only twelve years old. His age meant he was likely to receive more praise than an average noble. At that point, massaging the facts to some degree was necessary.

“Is there nothing you wish to say, Arcus?”

“No, sir. I have no objections.”

“Even when your vast achievements are stolen before your very eyes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then demonstrate your loyalty for me.”

Arcus stood up and put a hand to his chest. “For His Majesty the King.”

“Very good. Know that death awaits you should you ever double-cross our name. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Are you certain this is what you want, Arcus?” Ceylan asked.

“It is within my own interests to limit the recognition my name gathers.”

Cultivating his fame would be a quick and easy way for Arcus to humiliate his parents. The question was, who would be next in the firing line? As long as the possibility remained that his parents would turn their anger on Lecia, his only choice was to lie low. He estimated that he should wait another two or three years before allowing his fame to grow—now was not the time.

“Arcus,” Shinlu called.

“Sir?”

“I don’t like how deep your understanding of the world is at your age. It’s unsettling.”

“Wh...” Arcus opened and closed his mouth, but nothing came out.

Shinlu was looking at him with a somewhat sickened expression. Arcus thought he was being as obedient as possible; where had this come from all of a sudden?

“Pfft!” Craib let out an amused splutter.

What exactly was Craib’s relationship to the king, that he could get away with that? It was starting to make Arcus feel uneasy.

Just then, the blind flipped open from the inside. Arcus gasped as Shinlu’s figure appeared. Arcus didn’t know how to react—this wasn’t supposed to be happening. Shinlu took a few steps down the dais, then sat down casually. He beckoned to Arcus, and it was Eulid who spoke next.

“Your Majesty!”

“It’s all right.” Shinlu waved his hand to dismiss Eulid.

Arcus approached the king nervously, then took a knee before him.

“Show me your arm.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I hear a spell of yours put it out of commission.”

Arcus began to unwrap his bandages. The appearance of his arm was back to normal, but he still struggled to make it move. That much hadn’t improved since he woke up. Shinlu took his arm, manipulating his fingers and joints, before frowning gently. He must have had some medical knowledge himself.

“This is quite the injury.”

“It is my intention to find a method that can heal it, sir.”

Shinlu placed a hand on Arcus’s head. “Allow me to thank you, as a father. Thank you for protecting Lan.”

“Your Majesty’s words are too good for me.”

“Not at all; I still intend to put you to work. I am simply trying to be nice.”

Craib let out an exaggerated sigh. “Just tell him you were worried. Why you

always gotta be so stoic?”

“Hngh?” Shinlu scowled at Craib.

It was a disgraceful way to speak to a king, but Arcus took it as a sign of their closeness. As an observer, however, it was nerve-racking.

Shinlu coughed, as if to regain his composure. “If you have any complaints about your medical treatment, tell me. I shall do what I can to make it right.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you so much for your kindness.”

“There will be an awards ceremony in a few days. You will receive an invitation, so be sure to attend.”

Arcus returned to his original position, and Shinlu turned his attention to the man who had preceded Arcus and Craib. He hadn’t addressed the man until now, perhaps intentionally. Shinlu scratched the back of his head awkwardly, then shook it twice.

“Sorry it took so long to get to you.”

“I’ll say. I was starting to worry you hadn’t noticed me.”

“Well, that’s one of your skills, isn’t it? It was always difficult to tell whether you were there or not.”

“That’s no excuse. Both you and Abend have been glancing in my direction for a while.”

“You never were one to cower from talking back.”

“You are too used to the timid people around you. Bar one.”

Arcus tried to think who that might be. It was then that Shinlu enveloped the air in tension again. His piercing majesty raced through the gloomy throne room like an all-encompassing electric current, sending prickles running up Arcus’s skin and causing his limbs to stiffen.

“Eido. I’ve heard you’ve been up to no good recently.”

“Of course. I’ve held on to my grudge against you, in retaliation for what you did that day.”

“A grudge, you say?”

“That’s right. My hatred for you is what has kept me fighting. You betrayed my trust, and I demand satisfaction.”

Shinlu said nothing, even as Eido bared his most vicious intentions.

Eido’s next words were softer. “Prince Ceylan told me there were reasons behind your driving us out. I am here to find out if he was telling the truth.”

“How incredibly disrespectful for you to come all this way to question the king. You realize there is nothing stopping me from taking your head?”

“I have never been under any illusion that my life is guaranteed to me. I am prepared for this encounter to harm us both, depending on your response.”

Despite Eido’s covert threat, neither the imperial guard nor Craib moved a muscle. Perhaps the king had commanded them to remain calm, no matter how volatile the situation—they all looked perfectly composed.

“Eido.”

“Lai—Shinlu Crosellode. Why did you attack us on that day? Why did you expel us from the capital?”

“Because it would have been an inconvenience to keep you here.”

“I’ve come all the way here, and you’re still dodging the question? Have the decency not to brush me off,” Eido snapped.

Shinlu’s reply was curt. “Lan told you everything, didn’t he? That’s all you need to know.”

“I am here because his explanation was insufficient.”

“You’re adamant about hearing it from me, aren’t you?”

“I am. It took resolve for me to come here. Answer my question.”

Resigned, Shinlu sat down on the steps leading to his throne. He looked up at the ceiling, recalling the long-gone day. “Things were rough in the capital back then. Ruffians ran amok, preventing ordinary citizens from even leaving their homes unless it was absolutely necessary. Yet neither nobility nor the officials in charge would do anything about it. We were unable to sit back and watch; we decided to do whatever we could by our own hands.”

“Yes. The ones who took action were those who lamented the city’s dire state. They wanted to regain peace; to build a capital where the powerless could live without fear.”

“There were two groups that gained prominence. Yours and mine.”

Shinlu and Eido told the tale together. One to pass judgment on the traitor. One to enact his revenge. They should have been confronting each other; instead they sounded like they were reminiscing over a drink.

“Our two groups worked hard to eliminate the city’s rogues, like we were in competition,” said Eido. “It seemed like we were fighting in their base—now called the slums—almost every night, and we would do what we could to help out the capital’s citizens. One day it seemed that peace was not far off. The remaining faction would be the biggest we’d ever faced, but still no match for our joined forces. I didn’t just think so; I *knew* that much was true. The dream we had been chasing was just around the corner.”

“However, it was then that a certain group—one which had only observed until then—made their move. My father and the nobility in authority gathered in the palace every day and every night to strategize. It was at one of those meetings that I heard their plans to take down this group and take the credit for themselves; not only that, but they planned to pin the blame for the state of the capital, and every crime that had been committed as a result, entirely upon you.”

Eido said nothing.

“I did not have the power to stop them. My father held absolute authority over the entire kingdom, and the views of the nobles who backed him were highly esteemed. I had no hand in statecraft yet; there was nothing I could do.”

“So you came up with a plan to drive us out?”

“Precisely. Once the last of the criminals were dealt with, you would be next. The only way to avoid that was to make sure you were as far from the capital as possible.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“If I’d told you, you would have insisted on staying. You’re so serious and

hardheaded, it's like your skull is made of diamond. You'd have helped us expel these last troublemakers, then gone after those who plotted against you. There would have been nothing I could do to cover for you."

"So instead you chose to force me out of the capital without explanation."

"I did. At least then nobody could frame you. After that, we could let the most influential miscreants take the hit for sullyng the capital."

"You really had to go to such lengths?"

"Yes; your prominence in the city demanded it," Shinlu murmured wistfully.

Craib had told Arcus all about Eido before they came here. He had no influence behind his name, but gathered many like-minded people, until he held great sway within the capital. There was no hesitation in his actions, even when he was confronted with nobility, officials, or guards. He saved countless people in a capital so turbulent you wouldn't think it was the same city as today.

Eido was a public figure at the time. Those who fought back against authority were extolled by the public no matter the time period. Eido and his men had been heroes as much as Shinlu's group; so much so that many of the older generation still remembered him, even ten years and change later.

But a hero's successes inevitably brought them to a tragic end. They were ostracized and rejected for their power. Those with authority dragged their name through the mud before executing them. Hero or not, that could not have been the desired end. Shinlu had troubled himself greatly over his decision to protect Eido from that future.

"That's all I have to tell you."

"I see," was all Eido muttered.

Shinlu made his way quietly down the dais, one steady step at a time, until he stood in front of Eido. The men made eye contact.

"Eido. Now that you have heard all of this, I have a request. I want you to lend us your power once more."

Eido lowered his gaze. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking from his

expression. “I am a traitor. I swore I’d break you.”

“That does not concern me.”

“And if I agreed to help, only to stab you in the back later?”

“Nor that.”

“There must have been nobles who knew the truth at the time. If they see you have asked for my help, there is a chance they may turn against you.”

“I am not the same spineless brat I was back then. Should anybody come bearing complaint, they will yield before the power I have cultivated since. None may speak against me now.”

Eido stayed silent.

“Come with me. There is nothing for you to fear.”

Still, Eido said nothing. He stayed where he was, trembling just slightly. A few more moments passed, and then he raised his head. His face was filled with rage, and he threw his body forward, as though lashing out at Shinlu.

“You dare impose your will on me again?! You dare ignore me—*again*?!”

“Yes. Because that’s the kind of man I am. You’ve always known as much. Manipulating people and causing trouble is how I move forward.”

“That’s right! That’s who you are! You never think about others. You’ve only ever done as you pleased, throwing everything around you into confusion!”

“Yes.”

“And you’re telling me I’ve got nothing to worry about?! Maybe not for me, but what about you? Are you really telling me you’re not going to feel any sort of pressure or face any hardship because of this?”

“Well...”

“I won’t be convinced, even if you say ‘no’! Look what your actions have brought you! You’ve let me nurse this grudge against you for years, enough that I was prepared to kill you and your son! You haven’t changed one bit. You take on all the responsibility, as though it’s fine for you to be the only one to suffer, and then it ends up in trouble like this!”

“Naturally. That way, nobody else has to undergo hardship.”

“I thought we were allies!”

“Me too. You were an irreplaceable ally to me, as were Craib and Renault. You still are.”

“Then... Then why didn’t you share the suffering between us? I wanted you to rely on me! Allies are allies because they help each other out when times are tough! I know you thought what you were doing was best for us, but I never wanted you to drive us out, as though you were betraying us! I wanted to help you, whether that meant a bloody end for me or not!” Eido’s shoulders were squared with anger.

“Eido,” Shinlu said. “Speaking for myself, I still valued the times we fought together, even after you left the city. The capital is as peaceful as it is today precisely because you and your men were there to make it so. It was not something my group could have achieved by ourselves.”

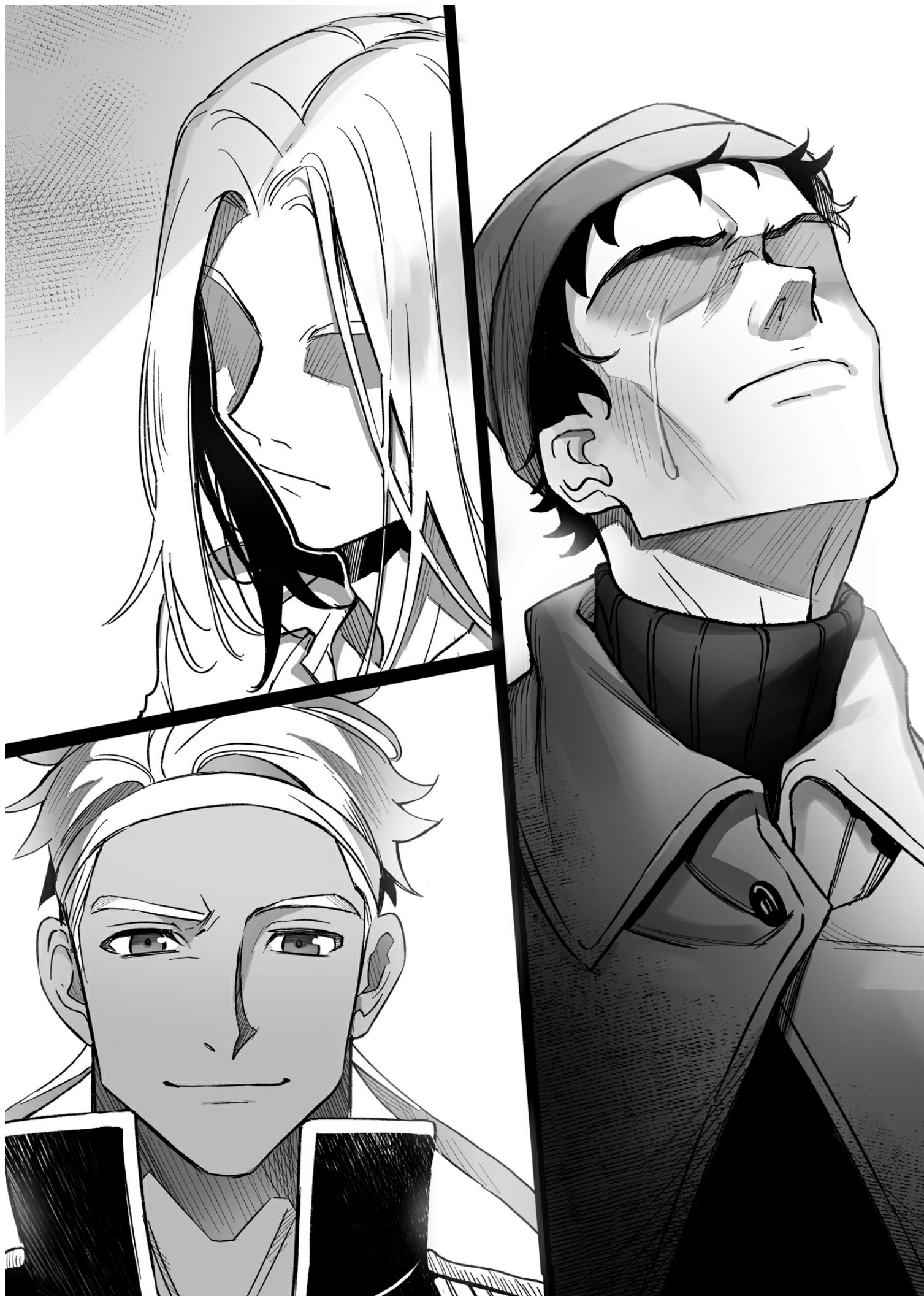
“You expect me to swallow that after all this time?”

“I know how unreasonable I am. Those are nevertheless my true feelings on the matter.”

“Okay—so what now? What am I supposed to do with *my* feelings? These feelings I’ve held on to all this time?” Eido’s shoulders shook for a while, as though he had nothing left to give, and then he looked down to the ground and fell quiet again. It was like something was bubbling up inside him, and he was doing all he could to suppress it.

“That’s why I want to give you this opportunity. This is my final chance for a do-over. My last chance to make up for you holding on to all this anger.” Shinlu paused. His next words carried everything he could muster. “I know this request comes too late, Eido, but I want you to come back to the capital. To come back to us. Please.”

Those words were not ineffective. Eido raised his head, looking up at the ceiling to disguise his expression and the emotions it held. Even then, those feelings overflowed, finding paths down his cheeks.



“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And no one in this city goes against what I say.”

“I see.” Eido gently took a knee. “In that case, I accept, Your Majesty,” he choked out.

It had been a long, tiring journey for Eido.

Shinlu knelt too, and gripped Eido’s hand. Truly, this was the best outcome anyone could have hoped for. Arcus looked to Craib, who was also nodding his approval.

And so, Arcus’s first audience with the king came to a close.

An order. An award granted by a master to their subordinate for distinguished military service—often, depending on the extent of the achievement, accompanied by a reward, sometimes in the form of territory or a new rank. The kingdom of Lainur was no exception to this tradition, and in the wake of the recent campaign’s successes, an order ceremony ensued in one of the castle’s large reception halls. Not everyone who took part was here, but those who managed significant achievements all received an invitation.

Granted, thought Arcus, His Royal Highness is getting the credit for most of the impressive stuff I did when we were ambushed...

The official story was that the Empire had ambushed Ceylan, but that he was easily able to turn the tables—all so that Ceylan’s own achievements could shine without him being overshadowed, and so that nobody could learn that they were taken by surprise in the first place. Arcus also guessed that a part of it was to preserve the honor of the imperial guard.

It was Ceylan who had dealt the final blow to Dyssea in the first place, for which he deserved the credit. Arcus didn’t feel that his achievements were stolen from him; in fact, he’d already thought something like this would happen. And, credit or not, he would likely receive a letter of commendation

and a cash reward. Noah and Cazzy had done much to aid the fighting too; Arcus was expecting all three rewards to show up at the new residence he'd purchased in due time.

For now, he surmised that he ought to just enjoy the honor of being allowed to attend in the first place. As a disinherited boy, gaining an invitation to such an event was unprecedented.

So it was that on the day of the ceremony, Arcus and Noah set out for the capital's royal castle. Cazzy stayed behind as usual; he disliked formal occasions. Noah informed him sternly that he would be required to attend such events one day, but otherwise Cazzy was tasked with cleaning and unpacking for the new house, equipped with an apron and bandana. Years of tending to his siblings in his youth had primed him for housework.

The ceremony hall was long and wide, with balconies set up high along each side. The far end of the room rose to hoist Shinlu's throne high, and for once the bamboo blind was raised, leaving him clearly visible.

The rest of the hall was filled to the brim. The guests were lined up on the ground level, and there was barely any free space. Arcus was reminded of school entrance and graduation ceremonies, or welcome ceremonies for new company employees—though they'd been on a much smaller scale than this.

"This place is crammed..." Arcus whispered.

"In addition to those who achieved highly during the war and their guests, those from the kingdom's martial and administrative houses are also in attendance. Esteemed guests from allied nations have also been invited," Noah replied, in the same diplomatic hiss.

"What about that piece of crap dad?"

"Lord Raytheft is currently abroad in the east, and has therefore not been invited."

There was no risk of running into him here. With an internal sigh of relief, Arcus surveyed his surroundings again. To the side of the large hall stood the generals from the imperial guard who led the national armed forces, and the four generals who led the armies to the north, east, south, and west—Count

Cremelia included. On top of two extra, temporarily appointed generals, there were twelve state magicians, including Craib.

On both sides of the stage where the king sat, there were seats prepared for the independent monarchs who served under him. Similarly to the state magicians, these monarchs also seemed to include several eccentrics. Among them was Louise, who had played a major role in the recent conflict. Arcus spotted a familiar face in the row in front.

“Hey, it’s Deet.”

“Lady Louise achieved much in the fighting, and young Deet led a unit of his own.”

“I wonder if Deet’s gonna get awarded anything.”

“I would say his chances are strong.”

Arcus agreed; he’d heard that Deet had pierced through the enemy ranks in the later stages of the fighting, chased after Nadar, and decapitated several of his men. Arcus didn’t know what level of honor his achievements merited, but they had to be worth something.

Other guests in attendance included nobility from the Northern Confederation, and generals and gentry alike from Sapphireberg. When Arcus turned his attention to the balconies above, he spotted visitors in an Asian style of dress—something which seemed like it might have drawn from Japanese and Chinese influences, were this the man’s world.

“Are those people from the east?”

“Indeed. They likely hail from Bǎi Liánbāng.”

“They were invited too, huh?”

It was no secret that the Crosellodes held strong ties with the superpower of the east; these guests would have needed to pass all the way over the Cross Mountain Range to attend this ceremony. That alone spoke to the occasion’s prestige.

When Arcus looked closer, he spotted various envoys from other nations waiting in the stage wings. From an outside perspective, this debacle should

have looked like a domestic affair of a noble revolting against his king, something which didn't paint Lainur in a favorable light should the information spread. Normally, foreign guests would not have been invited, but thanks to the Empire's attempt at clandestine interference, it was inevitable; this ceremony also acted as a denouncement of the Empire's action.

The foreign visitors were all from nations that regarded the Gillis Empire as an enemy. With the conflict's sweeping victory, it must have been a simple decision for these guests to accept their invitations.

The ceremony's facilitator walked towards the stage's wings; the preparations must have been complete. There was an address to kick things off, and then the king and prince took to the stage. When they had taken their seats, the facilitator spoke.

"Nadar's rebellion was part of a despicable plot by the Gillis Empire. However, His Royal Highness thwarted their scheme handily and led our kingdom to victory."

The facilitator went into a summary of the war. At times his tone was subdued; at others, filled with rage—but it was always rich with emotion, as if to ring true with the sympathies of the attendees. When he was finished, the envoys from other nations approached Shinlu to give their congratulations, one after the other.

"Our most heartfelt congratulations on Your Majesty's victory."

"Your Majesty's easy victory is to be celebrated."

"This just goes to show the immense power of the Crosellode House."

And so on. Once these greetings were finished, it was time for the king's address.

"I am king of Lainur, Shinlu Crosellode. First, I would like to extend my thanks to our esteemed guests, who have traveled far to make it to this ceremony today." Shinlu paused. "Before we begin, there is one thing more I would like to say. Not only was this my son, Prince Ceylan's, first campaign; not only did he lead a grand army to victory; he has further still claimed the life of the Empire's eastern field army's commander, Dyssea Lubanka. His are the first

achievements I wish to recognize here today.”

As the campaign’s commander, Ceylan needed to come first, yet as one of the parties handing out the rewards, his achievements weren’t meant to be acknowledged as part of the main ceremony—hence their sequestration to the preamble.

Ceylan was urged forward by the facilitator, at which point a ceremonial bell rang clear. When the noise had faded, the audience burst into applause, and Ceylan went to stand in front of his father.

“Your actions were commendable, and in keeping with the name of Lainur’s prince. Continue to devote yourself to the kingdom and its people.”

“Yes, sir! I shall do my utmost.”

The envoys from before stepped forwards to congratulate Ceylan personally on his achievements.

“It is now time for the conferral of honors! His Majesty shall benevolently reward those who contributed to this war, in order of the significance of their achievements. Those who are called shall graciously accept their reward.”

There was a short pause following the facilitator’s announcement. A drumroll sounded out above the audience, but unlike the reaction such a sound might provoke in the man’s world, the crowd remained silent. The facilitator’s voice sounded once more when the hall had fallen completely still.

“The first honor shall be awarded to Lady Louise Rustinell!”

There was a stir amongst the guests, with many of them voicing their lack of surprise that the Headhunter Witch should be first.

“Lady Louise magnificently broke through the central forces in the battle upon the Mildoor Plains, led the resulting siege, and captured the head of Porque Nadar, the enemy’s commander, thereby bringing the conflict to an end. As a reward for her efforts, she will receive the first award of five hundred gold, the Order of the Great Cross of Distinguished Service, and the former Nadar territories of Maysba, Rossuner, and Lat. Lady Louise, please come before His Majesty.”

Louise nodded and stepped forward. She had set off for the capital at sunrise, and her journey seemed to have been a smooth one; there was none of the bandit-like wildness about her that Arcus had felt from her before. She looked like a model military officer.

As she moved, so did several officials to stand at the king's side. Each of them held trays with letters of commendation, medals, tags to exchange for gold, and documents to grant the recipient their promised territory.

"Hello, Louise."

"It is a pleasure to see you, Your Majesty."

"You never fail to pull us out of a sticky situation when the Empire is involved."

"I am happy to live up to my nickname at any time, and collect as many heads as you desire."

"Glad to hear it. Just be careful to leave some for everyone else."

"I cannot promise anything. My sword suffers from an insatiable appetite."

Shinlu chuckled. "Is that so?" His smile gave way to a more dignified expression. "Allow me to thank you for rescuing Lan."

"I do not deserve such thanks."

The two of them brought their fists together. Louise and Shinlu's relationship appeared to be very casual when you considered that Shinlu's nation ruled over her own, but perhaps this was what all his relationships with monarchs were like.

Meanwhile, Deet was muttering irritably to himself. From the way his lips moved, Arcus caught something about "Mom taking my kills." Clearly, he hadn't changed one bit.

Louise had her attendants collect her rewards and hold them up to the audience, as if to show off the vast spoils given to those with the greatest achievements. She returned to her place among the roaring and applauding crowd. Her commendation set the pattern for what was to come.

Shinlu spoke without waiting for the facilitator. "The next awards go to

Sharman and Ronell. I am told that they did not falter at the appearance of Bague Gruba, instead continuing to fight. I would like to recognize their bravery. Come forward.”

Countess Sharman and Baron Ronell stood up straight and moved ahead of the troops behind them. They seemed especially tense, perhaps because the king had called on them himself. Arcus studied them. Ronell had a large scar across his face, while Sharman had lost an arm. They were likely wounds that had been picked up in the fight against Gruba.

It was somewhat rare for an order to be conferred on the basis of loyalty rather than tangible achievement. Yet it sounded like these two had stood firm against that beast as it threatened to annihilate them and their troops. That was more than enough of an achievement in itself.

The guests seemed aware of the significance of the name “Bague Gruba.”

“*The Bague Gruba?*”

“It’s a wonder they even came back alive...”

The lords may not have had any heads to tell of their successes, but nobody questioned that they deserved their reward.

“Was that guy really that bad?” Arcus whispered to Noah.

“Bague Gruba is the Empire’s most powerful commander, feared by all its neighboring nations. He has slaughtered countless generals and royals, and conquered many a country. They say every last citizen of the nations surrounding the Empire holds a grudge against him. I would wager that his reputation overshadows even that of Lady Louise.”

“No way...”

That raging bull was a bigger deal than Arcus thought. His intimidating air and fighting style had left a strong impression on Arcus, but he hadn’t expected the man to be worth an order. The Empire’s and that beast’s involvement in the conflict was all it took to twist it into irregularity.

Shinlu spoke again. “Your achievements do not equate to kills. However, you showed great courage on the field, held back the destruction of your soldiers’

ranks, and displayed loyalty to the royal family. Your deeds warrant the second acknowledgment of this ceremony. Sharman, you shall receive two hundred gold and the territory of Robelia. Ronell, you have earned the title of viscount, and you shall both receive the Order of the Cross of Military Service.”

An order on top of territory and a promotion?

Countess Sharman and Baron Ronell approached the king, the surprise clear on their faces. Sharman looked nervous, while the king’s recognition of his service had moved a stoic Ronell to tears. Everyone liked to be praised when they’d pushed themselves. It was like Arcus was watching a period drama, so much so that he felt like he was about to start crying himself.

Sharman and Ronell returned to their places amidst much applause.

“Everyone here is incredible...” Arcus sighed. He couldn’t think of a more eloquent way of putting it.

Noah let out an exasperated sigh. “You seem rather detached from the whole thing, Master Arcus.”

“Of course. This has nothing to do with me.”

“You ought to prepare yourself for being called forward.”

“I’m not gonna get called! I’m a kid.”

Those receiving awards were prominent players in the conflict, all of them with the status to back themselves up. Arcus didn’t have that; his status wasn’t even prestigious enough to be a foot soldier, let alone to be rewarded at a ceremony like this.

“The third award is for Arcus Raytheft, eldest son to the Raytheft House.”

Arcus had a nagging sense his name had just been called.

“But there’s no way...”

“Would you like to finish your sentence? Incidentally, I have a feeling I just heard a very familiar name indeed.”

Arcus didn’t say anything. Instead he looked up to find the facilitator staring in his direction. “...Huh?”

As questions whirled through Arcus's mind, the crowd started to stir.

"Who?"

"Raytheft's...eldest son?"

"Why was an eastern house involved in a conflict in the west?"

Every voice was full of confusion. Those who took part in the fighting aside, the other nobles in attendance had no reason to know about Arcus.

As the audience started to get louder, the facilitator began to speak of Arcus's achievements.

"Arcus identified the plan to attack His Royal Highness, and attacked one of their hideaways, uncovering valuable information. He rooted out evidence of Nadar's disaffection and his collusion with the Empire, assisted in His Royal Highness's escape from Nadar, and in the fighting, destroyed one of the Empire's magical units. He even defeated the head of the enemy army's attendants, Byle Ern—the Boar Spear—in a one-on-one fight."

It was indeed an accurate account of what Arcus had accomplished during his recent journey. He assisted in capturing the traitors, helped with Ceylan's escape, destroyed an enemy unit with his Spinning Barrel, and, now that the facilitator mentioned it, *had* engaged in a one-on-one fight with that attendant under Ceylan's orders.

"I did more stuff than I realized..."

"You make it sound as though you were completely unaware. Or is that really the case?"

"I was too focused on getting it all done, okay?!"

The facilitator continued to speak during Arcus's hushed quarrel with Noah. "His deeds warrant the third acknowledgment of this ceremony! Arcus Raytheft will receive one hundred gold, and the Order of the Silver Cross. Arcus Raytheft! Come before His Majesty!"

Gold *and* an order?

"Is this guy serious?"

A hundred gold was an inordinate amount of money, but what really shocked Arcus was the order.

The Order of the Silver Cross. Its award required a tangible achievement on the battlefield, and it was the next highest order that could be awarded to Lainur's citizens of the rank of general and below after the Order of the Golden Cross. It was enough to make Arcus tremble.

Noah began to applaud, quite casually. "Congratulations, Master Arcus."

"Why are you acting like this is no big deal?!"

"For you, it shouldn't be."

How could anybody say that *this* was perfectly normal?

The facilitator had called Arcus forward, but he had no idea what he was supposed to do exactly. Nerves and confusion locked his limbs, and anxiety began to overwhelm him.

"U-Um, Noah? Am I really allowed up there?"

"This has nothing to do with permission, Master Arcus. You were called, therefore you must go."

"I get that, it's just..."

"Everybody is waiting for you. I suggest you gather your resolve."

At Noah's (somewhat forceful) encouragement, Arcus weaved through the crowd and stepped out onto a path laid with a crimson carpet, his mind still a whir of confusion. His appearance elicited a wave of cries from the people around him.

"Th-That's a child! It's a child!"

"Look how short he is! He can't be much more than ten!"

"*He* took on the Boar Spear in a one-on-one fight? Is this a farce of some kind?"

Astonishment rippled through the crowd, and when it stirred now, it was louder than anything before. Arcus couldn't blame them for struggling to believe that a child could be capable of such military exploits, especially when

presented with it so suddenly. He himself was bewildered enough as it was. The confusion in the hall quickly descended into chaos.

“You are in His Majesty’s presence! Please refrain from idle chatter!” Eulid called out, successfully returning quiet to the hall.

Ceylan took the opportunity to stand up from his chair and step forward. “I can attest to Arcus’s achievements! I ordered him to stand off against the Boar Spear, and he performed spectacularly, bringing me the head as an offering. My imperial guard can corroborate this feat.”

This time, total silence fell on the crowd. It was clear that many of them still struggled to believe Ceylan’s words, at the same time knowing they couldn’t be wrong—not at a ceremony like this.

Arcus traversed the red carpet until he stood in front of Shinlu.

The king looked like he was struggling to suppress a smile. “You seem surprised. It’s written all over your face, in fact.”

“I...did not think I had done anything that called for a reward.”

“In that case, you were naive. Incredibly naive.” Shinlu lowered his tone, as though addressing himself. “Although I suppose a jack-in-a-box is useless if you already know what’s coming.”

Arcus took that to mean that Shinlu *wanted* to surprise him, which seemed rather mean to him.

Shinlu regained his serious expression then. “I never thought I’d be conferring a war order to a child. I’d say you were the first child reckless enough to deserve one in the long history of this kingdom. That’s before we touch on one other achievement that we’re not mentioning today.”

Shinlu let the crowd overhear his words, creating another stir among them. The king clearly wanted them to know that Arcus was capable of even more.

This seemed to have piqued even the curiosity of the foreign guests.

“There’s more?”

“It must be unrelated to the war. That is why it isn’t being recognized here.”

“You’ll have to wait until our preparations are ready, but we’ll be throwing an extravagant ceremony for that too,” Shinlu said.

“Y-Yes, sir, thank you so much. I shall look forward to it.”

“Don’t be satisfied with just this order. Keep working hard.”

“Yes, sir!” Taking his letter of commendation from Shinlu, Arcus bowed again.

An official presented him with his tag and medal, at which point the audience erupted into cheers and applause, as they had done for Louise and the lords.



He could only imagine how many pairs of eyes were staring at him right now. While goosebumps spread across his back as he imagined those gazes scrutinizing him, being the center of attention wasn't quite as uncomfortable as he'd expected. To the contrary, he was enjoying it. It pleased him to know that these people envied him. It was as though he suddenly had it all: everything that had been denied him up till now. It felt *good*; satisfying, despite how petty Arcus knew it was. This was the result of all his hard work. Arcus sought Craib in the crowd, and found his uncle with a genuine, carefree smile on his face.

Once his part was over, Arcus returned to his original spot. The bustle of the people around him as he did left a lasting impression.

Part 2: The Celebration

It was the start of the afternoon, before the award ceremony was to take place.

“So this is my house, huh?”

Arcus stared up at the two-story building, located in a corner of the capital several other nobles called home. It stood out for its bright peaked roof with unglazed tiles. Supported by dark timber posts, the walls were painted with white plaster. Creases in the coating stood out like blood vessels. The gate and entrance were fully illuminated by Sol Glasses, and there was even a cylindrical tower—the type that was common in western-style architecture in the man’s world.

It officially belonged to Arcus. He had tasked Noah with finding a suitable house shortly before his journey to the west, and this had been what he eventually ferreted out. The biggest hurdle in the process was money, which Arcus cleared with the leftover funds he’d received from the Magician’s Guild when he presented his aethometer. All he’d needed then was to find a property he was happy to call home; he’d been ready to play the long game, but Noah had found the perfect place in record time.

This place was evidently built a long time ago; it was a little worse for wear in places, but for now it was more than enough. Arcus couldn’t stand the idea of insects making their way in, so he’d have to do something about that, but a few cannily made and placed seals would handle the matter.

Noah kneeled down so that he was at Arcus’s eye level, and began to applaud him gently. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Now I can finally do whatever I want.” The sigh Arcus let out was close to one of relief.

He wouldn’t need to worry about his activities being discovered by his parents or their servants anymore, nor would he have to put up with scathing and

abusive gossip. He wouldn't be living with Lecia anymore, but that wasn't much of a concern; he was still in the capital, and he would no doubt see plenty of her once they were both enrolled in the Institute. He was sure she would feel similarly.

Cazzy looked up at the building with his arms folded. "It's kinda...tiny, compared to the Raytheft estate, ain't it?"

Considerably so, compared to both the Raythefts' main residence and Craib's. Aside from a study and a guest bedroom, it had only the bare minimum when it came to rooms.

"It's the perfect size," Arcus said. "It's only gonna be us three and any attendants I hire in the future who'll be using it."

"Indeed. Any bigger, and you would need to find extra staff to fill the space."

"Guess it's a good thing it's small then!" Cazzy cackled.

"However..." Noah's eyes narrowed with concern.

"What?" Arcus prompted.

"It won't do for the long term, if you are planning to continue making a name for yourself."

"Oh... Yeah, I was wondering about that."

Cazzy jerked his chin in the direction of the house. "What? You're sayin' this place ain't classy enough?"

"Naturally. Nobles are judged based on appearances. Financial power can be deduced from the extravagance of one's residence, as can that noble's connections be deduced from its location. At the very least, one should be sure that the garden is kept tidy, so as not to risk scorn."

Nobility had made their interiors as luxurious as possible since time immemorial. It was a good strategy to make their visitors think they were prospering, thereby making them more willing to negotiate a deal.

As a successful military family, appearances for the Raythefts were less important than deeds, but could still send the message that they were successful in noble matters as well. There was just one thing Arcus needed to

make clear.

“I don’t wanna have a garden like Marquess Gaston...”

“His was a unique case, although not especially unusual. Some nobles like their gardens to make a powerful statement about who they are.”

“Not unusual, huh?”

Meaning there were offensive gardens like that dotted around the capital. The man’s world has its own “interesting” architectural styles, but perhaps in this world it was all about topiary and statues.

“The money you spend on your garden is, of course, very visible, but more than that, it defines who you are to any observers. It is a matter of keeping yourself presentable to the outside world. It is a matter of the story you wish to cultivate for anybody looking in. It is also a matter of the gardener you choose to employ—in other words, your connections.”

“Damn, being a noble sure is a pain in the ass.”

“Damn, workin’ for a noble sure is a pain in the ass...”

Arcus and Cazzy were on the same page.

Noah frowned at Arcus. “What makes you say that, Master Arcus?”

“Huh? Well, y’know. I’m closer to the common people than nobility, if you think about it.”

“I find that view difficult to comprehend, given that you have lived in a noble estate your entire life. Please do enlighten me as to your experiences as a commoner.”

“I’ve been downtown and stuff, y’know? You don’t see a lotta nobles doing that, do you?”

It was a poor excuse, but one that was quickly forgotten as Cazzy studied the new house’s garden.

“Whaddya gonna do with this, then?”

“I’ll need to grab that soma plant from my uncle’s garden. After that there won’t be much space left.”

“Huh? But where are ya gonna do all that trainin’ ya love so much?”

“Good point. I guess I’ll either borrow my uncle’s garden, or find somewhere else. It’ll be nice to get out of the house now and then.”

“Wow, this is your house, Arcus? Sure looks cozy!”

“Yeah, it’s small. But still, it’s the perfect size for... Huh?” It was only after Arcus started answering that he noticed something was off. He turned around to find Sue standing there.



The dark-haired girl frowned as she looked up at the house. The way she was acting, you would think she had been here all along.

“Sue! Where did you come from?”

“I heard you bought a house, so I came to see it!”

“Where did you hear that from?”

Sue grinned and puffed out her chest. “From somebody who was kind enough to tell me.”

“You sure take interest in the weirdest things...”

Arcus glanced at Sue’s possible sources, but both of them shook their heads, clueless. So where *had* she heard it from? Sue was as mysterious as always.

“Wait, are ya that insane genius kid who likes to hang with our master? I think I met ya way back...”

“Insane?”

“Ah. So you are the young lady with whom Master Arcus studies magic?”

“That’s me! It’s nice to meet you!” Sue said. She was clearly very comfortable speaking to his servants casually.

It seemed neither she nor Cazzy bore any grudge for their first encounter. Cazzy didn’t take things to heart like that, and Sue was a broad-minded sort. Arcus doubted either of them was thinking that hard about how they met right now.

Sue turned back to Arcus, a wide smile on her face. “Welcome back, Arcus.”

“Oh, uh... Thanks,” Arcus replied, a little flustered. He hadn’t expected her to say that, nor for her to smile at him. It was a little embarrassing to be welcomed back after all this time, but her words also made him realize that he *was* home—for the time being at least. His schedule had been so hectic since he’d returned that it felt like he was on a never-ending rollercoaster. “Sorry I didn’t get in touch with you.”

“You were busy, right? It’s not your fault.” Sue’s gaze slid to Arcus’s left side. “How’s your arm doing?”

“I still can’t move it properly, but I’m sure I’ll figure something out.” Arcus suddenly paused. “Wait, how did you know I injured my arm?”

“Huh?”

“Well, I mean...”

This was the first time the pair had met since Arcus returned to the capital. He hadn’t had the chance to tell Sue about his injury.

Sue’s eyes widened. “O-Oh, well, you know, it’s, uh... It’s all bandaged up like that, you see!”

“I guess...”

“Either that means you hurt your arm, or it means you’re one of those drama queen magicians! Wait, does that mean—”

“No! I’m not that cringey!” Arcus protested, before Sue could speculate any further. Apparently, this world had young kids who liked to immerse themselves in their magical fantasies too—not that Arcus was one of those. He suspected that that kind of delusional adolescent posturing had to be even worse in a world with actual magic.

“I’ll heal up that arm for you!” Sue proclaimed.

“What?”

“I’ll take care of you. Right up till it’s healed completely!”

“Oh, er. Thanks,” Arcus replied, a little bemused at the earnestness in Sue’s expression. For whatever reason, she seemed eager to help him out, despite the fact that the injury had nothing to do with her.

That aside, she certainly liked to say the most embarrassing things with the straightest of faces. Arcus’s face felt like it was on fire, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Meanwhile, his butlers were watching, one of them fondly and the other with a twisted smirk on his face.

“Dear me...”

Arcus glared at Noah and Cazzy, who was cackling.

Sue was studying the house again. “This’ll be a good place for us to study too.

Make sure our study room is south-facing so it gets a lot of light!”

“You’re really excited about making this our new hang-out spot, huh?”

“Of course I am! This’ll be the easiest place for us to meet, right?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

It was Arcus’s house; he wouldn’t need to ask anybody’s permission.

“And you’ll wanna make sure you’ve always got plenty of snacks and tea, okay?”

“You’re not a very gracious guest, are you?”

“Hey, you’re a noble! You gotta pull out all the stops when it comes to entertaining visitors!”

“I’d be happy to, as long as my visitors are those I’ve invited in the first place.”

Arcus wasn’t feeling so embarrassed anymore now that he and Sue were bantering like they always had.

“It’s been too long since I’ve done this!” Sue giggled.

She went right for his cheeks while Arcus was preoccupied.

A few days had passed since the extravagant order ceremony at the castle. Arcus was moved into his new home, and much of the unpacking was finished by the time that evening rolled around. He’d taken up a position at the desk in his new bedroom.

“Master Arcus?” Noah called from behind him.

There was no response.

“Master Arcus? Master Arcus?”

“Heh heh.”

This time, there *was* a response: a strange laugh, but nothing more, which gave away the shape of Arcus’s unseen goofy grin. Noah grimaced slightly, and Cazzy poked his head around the door then.

“I’m pretty much done on my end. How’s it goin’ over here?”

“Thank you, Cazzy. As for me, it’s... Well, it’s what you see before you.”

“Huh? Jeez, what’s he doin’?”

“Our master appears to be engaged in mooning over his order.”

“Huh.” Despite his absence, Cazzy was aware of the award Arcus received at the ceremony. Apparently, Arcus was delighted at the recognition of his efforts.

“He wasn’t like this at first, but the more he looks at it, the more it seems he realizes how outstanding his feats actually were.”

“I reckon it’s ’cause he’s never really been praised much before. And now the kingdom’s head honcho comes along to do just that. ’Course he’s happy.”

“I agree. I am sure this is the greatest honor Master Arcus ever imagined he would receive.”

“But that don’t mean we can let him get away with starin’ at that thing forever.”

“Indeed. Master Arcus? Master Arcus? Could we have your attention for a moment, please?” Noah strengthened his tone a little.

Arcus finally reacted; his back straightened up at once, and he turned around. “Hm? Oh, it’s you guys.”

“How kind of you to notice. We were just wondering how long you were planning on being engrossed in your order.”

“C’mon, don’t be like that,” Arcus retorted. “Let me enjoy it a little. It’s not like having this means I’m done working hard, and it’s not like I’m running around showing this off either.”

“I should hope not. Allowing yourself to become obsessed with fame and fortune only leads to trouble.”

“Yeah, I learned that much from Marquess Gaston and Count Nadar.”

“Quite.”

Arcus shuddered to think he might end up like *them*. The lure of money and glory pulled them away from a righteous path and led them to their respective downfalls. If Arcus allowed himself to become too giddy over his achievements,

there was a chance he would trip up further down the line. It was a lesson he knew well from his experience of the man's life, and one he intended to take to heart.

But that didn't mean he had to forgo celebrating his success. He had an *order*. A physical manifestation of praise, and one he could wear proudly on his person. It was *awesome*.

"What did you guys need?" Arcus asked.

"I came to warn you that it will soon be time to welcome your guests."

"Ah! I didn't realize it was that late!"

"Could ya be any more scatterbrained?"

"Master Arcus. As master of the house, you must be ready to see guests at all times, else your disposition may be called into question. I understand that you do not hold a noble position yet, but you are nevertheless a figure associated with this country's military."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll get ready right away." Arcus got to his feet.

While only a small affair, he was holding a party to celebrate his safe return from the battlefield and his order this evening. It wasn't so much to celebrate himself, as to celebrate the hard work of his associates who'd also taken part in the fighting; Louise, Deet, and Craib were also invited.

After quickly making sure his attire was in order, Arcus left the final preparations to Cazzy, and stepped outside with Noah to wait for the guests to arrive. No sooner were they out than they heard a voice at the gate.

"It's time, is it?"

The solitary figure who spoke was Eido. Unlike his usual inconspicuous attire, he was in the sort of outfit a chef might wear. The black cloth had turned white, and his knitted hat was replaced with a chef's hat. Around his neck was a red scarf. All he needed now was a knife and a ladle in each hand.

"That look really does suit you," Arcus remarked, approaching him.

"Hm. Thanks for the compliment."

“Uh, no problem.” Arcus nodded stiffly, not having expected Eido to take his words at face value.

Eido seemed to be in a good mood, but also as stoic as ever. Though it was that same stoicism and sense of duty which led to his dispute with the king.

Noah approached then. “I never imagined you would become our colleague, Eido.”

“It was His Majesty’s idea.”

“I still dunno why His Majesty picked *me* as your new boss,” Arcus said. “I thought he would want you for himself.”

“Partly I imagine he thought I’d do better working for a familiar face, but also somewhere I wouldn’t attract too much attention. I think he’s also hoping I can protect you if anything happens.”

Arcus didn’t know what happened after Eido and Shinlu had made peace with each other; all he knew was that Eido was now working for him. It was a total surprise, since Arcus was convinced Eido’s skills made him a perfect fit as a royal spy or bodyguard. Although he did understand why Shinlu would want him protected, as the aethometer’s inventor.

“And to make you my cook of all things...”

“I need a job that keeps me suitably busy on a daily basis, and you were short of personnel to run an entire household. I wanted to help, even if I can’t offer much.”

“Trust me, it’s a real help. I just thought you’d want to do something that makes better use of your skills.”

“I need to repay my debt to His Majesty. I will stay here as long as he wills it, and that’s that. And, as long as I am here, I will continue to do the work I excel at, for I am not alone in that side of things.”

“I see.”

So Eido was planning to make use of his subordinates even as he worked at Arcus’s estate. They were a capable group. Then, in an emergency, Eido could easily return to the king’s side, or do whatever needed to be done from his

position here.

A carriage pulled up to the gate as their conversation wound down. It was a high-quality model; not flashy, but obviously expensive. The emblem of the Rustinell House adorned its upper part. It wasn't long until a russet-haired boy had jumped out of it: Deet, the heir to the Rustinell family. When Arcus had seen him before, his hair was always all over the place. Now it was properly combed, making him look like a fine young master. He was in his best clothes, the kind common to both young sons and daughters of noble families. The mammoth head-loppe he'd so gleefully lugged around was nowhere to be seen, and nor was the plaster he wore over his nose, making him seem much more sensible than usual.

Deet grinned happily as he rushed up to Arcus. "Hey, bro!"

"Deet! You made it!"

"Course I did! I'd never miss *your* party!" The energy suddenly drained from Deet's expression, and he started rolling his shoulders. "I'm totally beat," he sighed. "I had a ton of other events to attend after the order ceremony, and they were all super formal. I was mad tense the whole time."

"That's 'cause the Rustinell family achieved the most during the war, right?"

"Yeah. It's all anyone wants to talk about. I was happy at first, getting praised all the time, but the more it goes on, you start seeing what everyone's really after."

"Ah."

Apparently, Deet had been swarmed by noble children hoping to deepen their connections with him at these parties. That meant a lot of flattery and bootlicking, something a straightforward boy like Deet didn't cope with well.

Once Deet was finished recounting the events of the past few days, he looked up at Arcus's estate. "So you got your own place, huh? I'm kinda jealous, now I see it."

"You're gonna get a castle way bigger than this eventually though, right?"

"I mean, yeah. But this is different, y'know?"

It wouldn't just be the one castle either; Deet was set to inherit estates and castles from Louise to which Arcus's new house couldn't even compare. Perhaps his jealousy was more akin to that of a boy whose friend had claimed a new secret base.

While the boys chatted, Louise stepped out of the carriage. She was a powerfully built woman with an eyepatch and hair the same shade as Deet's. Though she had worn her military uniform properly at the order ceremony, she'd clearly cut loose a little by now. A sword hung from her hip, and an animal pelt around her shoulders, imbuing her with her signature feral energy.

"I'm so pleased that you accepted my invitation, Lady Louise."

"Are we the first here?"

"Yes, My Lady."

"I heard you've got a rare drink in store for us. I wasn't going to miss out after hearing *that*."

"That's right. I have confidence that the taste will please Your Ladyship."

"Hm? There's no taking that back now. I won't be happy if it tastes like crap!" Louise smirked at him. Arcus knew she was a seasoned drinker, but even then his soma wine was guaranteed to satisfy her.

"Thank you again, My Lady, for everything you did during the recent conflict."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. Thanks to you, the fight was nothing but beneficial for me. I'm fiefs and fortunes richer, and I got to see how His Royal Highness fights. And now Deet has a proper war under his belt too. It was win-win all around."

"Gimme five, bro!" said Deet.

"Yeah!"

Their hands collided with a thunderous clap.

"Also, My Lady, if I could ask about the silver..."

"Leave it to me; I'll take care of it. I'd like to hear more details sooner rather than later, though."

“I-I’m afraid that might have to wait a little longer...”

It seemed Louise already had an inkling of what he needed the silver for, but there was still a while to go before Arcus would unveil and distribute the aethometer among the regional monarchs. Shinlu had insisted that they be given a product of as high a quality as possible. Handing them something shoddy risked fracturing their trust in the king. Arcus was working to further fine-tune the aethometer, which meant gathering more data, in turn lengthening the time before his invention could be shared. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that it all depended on the work Arcus put in.

Deet suddenly seemed to notice Eido then. “Huh? Hey, you’re that assassin!”

“Welcome to the party, son of Rustinell.”

“Huh? Oh, um... Thanks?” Their responses seemed to miss each other, but then Deet’s surprise returned. “Wait, no! What are you doing here? You’re s’posed to be our enemy!” he accused hysterically.

“I used to be. Now I am simply this estate’s cook.”

“Th-The cook?”

“That’s right.”

“Wait a moment.” Louise suddenly intervened. “Are you that magician that got in our way all that time ago?”

“Yes, My Lady. It is as you say.”

“Hm.” Louise’s eyes narrowed.

Deet tugged at Arcus’s sleeve. “I-Is it gonna be okay? He was our enemy, right?”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m guessing a lot has happened that we don’t know about,” Louise said. “But I trust His Majesty’s judgment, and we have no right to defy it in any case.”

“I am indeed here by His Majesty’s request,” Eido confirmed.

“Right. Then there’s nothing more for me to say.” Louise’s voice was decisive.

"If mom says it's okay, then I guess it's fine," Deet mumbled.

Another carriage arrived then, and out stepped the silver-haired giant, Craib Abend.

"Damn, I didn't make it here first."

"Uncle! You made it!"

"I sure did! It's my nephew's first time hostin' a party. Wasn't gonna miss it, was I?" Craib grinned.

"Thank you for your help, Crucible," said Louise.

"Nah, I've caused more than enough trouble for you on the battlefield before."

"I'll say."

So they had fought side by side before, sharing in the hardship of pitched battle. They started discussing it animatedly, though the subject did not lend itself to outright joy.

Craib's gaze fell on Eido. His eyes narrowed suspiciously, like he struggled to identify what he was looking at. "What are you wearin' that getup for?"

"I'm a cook."



Craib looked at Arcus and Noah, seeking confirmation.

“He’s the cook,” Arcus said.

“He is indeed,” Noah agreed.

Craib turned back to Eido. “You...can cook?”

“I have some passing confidence in my skills.”

“Confidence, huh?” Craib looked unconvinced.

“That’s right,” Eido said. “I’ve recalled a bevy of dishes I’ve meant to make in the past. I hope you’ll look forward to them.”

“Is that right? I guess it wouldn’t hurt to get my hopes up then.” Craib paused. “Oh, that’s right, Eido. Did you get to meet him yet?”

“I did, yes.”

“And?”

“He just made a remark as if he’d known I’d come back to the capital from the very beginning. Nothing else.”

“Oh yeah?” Craib let out a hearty laugh; Eido shrank back sheepishly.

Arcus wondered what they were talking about, but an explanation was not forthcoming. He waited for a chance to speak with his uncle instead, but...

“You haven’t got time to worry ’bout me right now, Arcus.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“See for yourself.”

Arcus turned to the gate, where yet another carriage was pulling up. This one was emblazoned with the Cremelia crest. Arcus straightened up unconsciously. The first person to alight from the carriage was a man. His dark hair streaked with white gave him an older appearance, but his stride was light and vigorous. His chest was dotted with medals, a precious sword bestowed on him by the previous king hung at his hip, and his uniform was mainly white, complete with a jacket. There was a sternness about him, but the tranquility of a resolute soldier who had been through a plethora of experiences outweighed it.

He was Purce Cremelia, head of the Cremelia House and one of the kingdom's generals.

Arcus rushed up to him at once. "My Lord. Thank you so much for accepting my invitation."

"My daughter was incredibly eager to come. Please pay me no mind, and enjoy hosting," Purce said, as his daughter Charlotte stepped out in front of him.

Arcus had never seen her like this: tonight she was in a gorgeous red dress, perfectly befitting a noble daughter. Her long, golden-brown hair was adorned with a barrette, and she wore a shawl across her shoulders. Her usual light clothing and sword usually made her look valiant, but in a dress she possessed an ephemeral beauty. If only there were a more listless expression on her face, she might have walked out of the pages of the Ancient Chronicles, a dead ringer for Jacqueline by the Windowside.

Charlotte held her skirt and curtsied elegantly. "It is a pleasure to see you, Arcus."

"And you, Lady Charlotte, after all this time. That red dress becomes you."

"Why, thank you. That pleases me to hear, even if you are just humoring me."

"I assure you, I am not..." Arcus felt himself growing bashful. Maybe it had been a little conceited of him to comment.

"Father has told me about your accomplishments in the west."

"Oh, but I hardly compared to His Royal Highness."

"Is that so? However, that should not erase your achievements." Charlotte let out a refined laugh, and Arcus smiled back at her.

When Arcus had finished greeting Charlotte, another young girl appeared tentatively from behind Purce. She had the same silver hair as Arcus, wrapped up in a ponytail. Her dress was mostly blue, and she walked the path leading to the house carefully, as if she was worried about dirtying it. The moment she spotted Arcus's face, her own lit up with a brilliant smile.

"Brother!"

“Lecia! I haven’t seen you in ages!”

“I know! My heartfelt congratulations on your order, brother.”

“Thanks.” Arcus took the hand Lecia extended to him.

It had been a while since the two of them last met. Their windows of opportunity had dwindled even before Arcus had gone on his journey west. It had been some months since their last meeting, but to Arcus it felt like it had been over a year. Lecia looked overjoyed to be able to see him without having to worry about who might be watching.

Arcus had asked Purce to bring Lecia along in his invitation. She was too young to travel alone, and sending her with Craib risked raising suspicions. As far as anyone in the Raytheft estate was aware, she was out meeting Charlotte tonight.

Purce turned to Craib. “Good evening, Crucible. Thank you for your recent service.”

“I never expected to be dispatched all the way to the east, Milord.”

“It just goes to show the trust His Majesty holds in you. I must admit, I am envious of your relationship with His Majesty, even as a vassal myself.”

“If I may, Milord, I’m sure he thinks of me only as a pawn with whom he can do whatever he likes.”

“Proof, if I ever heard it, that he trusts you completely. I would very much like to be in your shoes.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that, even for you, Milord.”

Purce laughed loudly. “I thought you might say that!” He then turned to Louise. “You too, Lady Louise. Thank you for your service.”

“Thank you, My Lord, but our efforts do not deserve praise. It was an easy fight, and we even profited from it.”

“Really? It seems to me things will be difficult for the west for some time to come.”

“I cannot deny that much,” Louise admitted with a shrug.

As Purce alluded to, Louise had a mountain of work ahead of her. The west's defenses needed rethinking, and decisions had to be made on how to allocate the new territories among her subordinates. She was looking at a busy stretch when she returned home from the capital.

Another carriage showed up. It had no crest, making it unidentifiable at first glance; Arcus could work out who it was, because there was only one person it could be, going by the guest list.

He was proven right moments later when Sue disembarked. For some reason, Lisa Lauzei, Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office, was with her. Sue wasn't in her usual casual clothing, but in a dress, just like Charlotte and Lecia—red, with a slit from the hip that gave it an incredibly mature air. She was also wearing just a touch of makeup, but it made all the difference to the impression she gave off.

Arcus couldn't help but stare. She just looked so different from what he was used to.

His mind remained blank as she approached, and as if she could see right through him, a malicious grin appeared on her lips. "What's wrong, Arcus? Too captivated to say anything?"

"What?! N-No! That's not it!"

"Oh, *really*?" Sue sidled up closer to him, still grinning. Arcus turned away so she wouldn't see the color in his cheeks, but she craned her neck to chase him.

She knew *exactly* what she was doing.

Arcus spotted Craib's expression then; he was frowning as though deep in thought.

"Uncle?"

"Oh, right, right. No, I get it now..." he murmured to himself after a pause, scratching at the back of his head. Then he stared at Arcus and sighed deeply, as though he were resigning himself to a future mired in trouble.

Arcus didn't have time to figure it out before Purce knelt down in front of Sue so that they were at eye level. "Should I be calling you Lady Susia this evening?"

“Yes, if you please.”

Arcus was confused. While Sue may have been daughter to a duke, Purce was a count who had been granted a position within the military by King Shinlu, *and* the head of the eastern houses. True, Sue’s house outranked his, but she didn’t hold any rank herself. There should have been no need for him to humble himself before her like this.

Sue’s response, meanwhile, was perfectly clear and dignified; a complete one-eighty from the cheerful tones with which she’d greeted Arcus.

Charlotte, who knew Sue too, also seemed perplexed by the exchange. Louise had her eyes narrowed; apparently she wasn’t clued in on any of this either.

“Sue?” Arcus prompted, hoping she would explain.

“Um... Eh heh heh...”

But she just laughed it off, making Arcus even more suspicious.

“Arcus Raytheft,” Lisa cut in. “There is no need to ask questions. Drop it.”

“Hm? Oh, um... Yes, My Lady.”

It must have been a sensitive issue if she was warning him off, so Arcus withdrew obediently. It was at this point that Lisa gave her greeting.

“It has been a long time, Arcus Raytheft.”

“Indeed it has, My Lady.”

“I have heard of your skilled exploits. Your loyalty to His Royal Highness is quite impressive. I envy you, in fact.”

“Yes, My Lady. I was delighted to finally be of service to His Royal Highness myself.”

“Very good.” Lisa nodded.

“You envy my brother, My Lady?” Lecia asked, cocking her head.

“I didn’t understand either...” Deet said.

“The highest honor for a Lainur noble is to die for the royal family,” Lisa explained. “I understand why you may not grasp such a concept, Master Dietria,

as you come from an impressive sovereignty yourself.”

It was a rigidly feudalistic way of thinking. Arcus couldn't help but be reminded of samurai from the man's world.

Lisa turned back to Arcus. “It appears I misjudged you.”

“My Lady?”

Before Lisa could explain, Sue interrupted. “That's right! How many times have I told you that Arcus isn't a threat? But you never listened!”

“Well, I... You must understand that I am a retainer to the royal family...”

“I see. What you're saying is that my word means nothing to you.” Sue gave Lisa a hard stare.

“Ma'am, that is not...” Lisa flinched under Sue's glare. Arcus thought he could pick up on a hint of fear in her reaction; there must have been quite a gulf in power between the two.

That same reaction made Craib grin. “Runnin' the Surveillance Office is a tough gig, huh?”

“C-Crucible...”

Apparently, Craib knew more than he was letting on.

The hierarchy among this group was somewhat complex. As a monarch, Louise was the highest ranking. Next came Purce, leader of the eastern houses, then Craib, and then the youngest, Lisa—or so Arcus deduced. But then there were personal standings and years of service to take into account. That was why Louise treated Purce as her superior, and while she and Craib were more or less equal, Purce still outranked Craib...just to make things a touch more complicated. And then there was Sue, who seemed to be an exception of some kind.

“It is a pleasure to see you tonight, Lady Susia,” Charlotte said.

“It is lovely to see you again,” Lecia said.

“I'm looking forward to a fun evening.” Sue smiled.

Charlotte and Lecia voiced their agreement.

Arcus felt a tug on his sleeve. “Do you know that girl, bro?” It was Deet.

“Yeah. She’s daughter to a duke. Her name is Lady Susia Algucia.”

“Nice to meet you!” Sue chirped.

“U-Um, yeah. Nice to meet you...”

The two introduced themselves to each other, and Deet seemed to have trouble keeping up with Sue’s pace. Still, Arcus was sure the awkwardness wouldn’t last long, given that they were both cheerful personalities.

Deet went on to exchange greetings with Lecia and Charlotte.

“Is this everyone, Arcus?” Craib asked.

“No, there should be one more. He should be here soon...” Arcus swept his gaze over the entranceway, looking out for his final guest. They showed up at that moment, with perfect timing.

“Arcus!” A mysterious voice rang out, seemingly from out of nowhere, neither masculine nor feminine in nature. Arcus looked up. There on the wall stood the Grave Sprite, Gown, waving an oversized sleeve and smiling. He hopped down from the wall. “Hello!”

“Good evening, Gown. Thanks for coming.”

“It’s okay! I don’t get a lot of invitations. Hello, everyone!” Gown went around to greet and shake hands with everyone. He spoke casually to everybody, no matter their age or status—perhaps because he was the oldest there. “Hello, Purce!”

“A pleasure to see you again, Gown.” Purce bowed respectfully.

“Hello, Louise!”

“Good evening. I’m glad we have this opportunity to spend some time together.” Louise’s words were stiff, but her smile was amiable.

Craib frowned, clearly skeptical. “Never expected you to invite a sprite.”

“He’s helped me out a lot,” Arcus explained.

“Yes! And Arcus is my friend!”

His friend? Arcus didn't know Gown considered them *that* close.

"Ah, yes," Eido spoke up. "You have the Phantom Hound's lantern, don't you?"

"No way. Is that true?" Craib asked.

"Yeah, Gown gave it to me a while ago."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!" Gown confirmed. "When that captain showed up!"

Craib grimaced. "Ah, we're talkin' 'bout Barbaros, huh?"

"I never imagined he was king of Granciel..." Arcus pulled the same face.

It was no wonder. He only found out about Barbaros's status after the fact. His appearance and mannerisms were completely that of a heroic seafaring pirate, although it did make sense now why Sue had been so wary of him.

"You figured it out, huh?" Craib said.

"It was the first time I'd ever seen him, but I already knew what he looked like from descriptions. I just never thought he'd wander into some random tavern in the capital."

"That guy's free as the wind. Don't be too trusting of him, Arcus."

"Yes, uncle." Arcus nodded. He knew Barbaros was one to be cautious of. He was a fun man to be around, which also made his company more susceptible to his will if they weren't careful.

Gown turned to Craib. "Long time no see, Craib. We haven't seen each other since the Molten Valley, have we?"

"Don't think so. Thanks for that one." Craib's smile was awkward, but polite.

"You've met Gown before, uncle?"

"Yeah."

Arcus was curious about the circumstances, but then he realized Lecia was acting strangely. Her mouth was moving, as though she were conversing with somebody.

“Lecia? Are you okay?”

“Oh? Ah! Oh, um. Yes! I’m fine!”

“You sure? You don’t have to hide it if you’re feeling sick or something.”

“I know! But I’m feeling completely healthy!” Lecia insisted. Physically, she was fine, then.

Arcus studied her a little more closely, not overly convinced. Gown approached her; the Grave Sprite had yet to introduce himself. Lecia’s body visibly froze; she must have been nervous.

“Hello, Lecia!”

“G-Good evening!”

“You look tired. Are you okay?”

“Yes! I’m perfectly fine!”

“Oh. I think you’re okay too, because you’re not a bad girl.” Gown continued to repeat the word “okay.”

What does he mean she’s not a “bad girl”?

“Um...” Lecia frowned. “M-May I ask if you are...‘okay’?”

“Why are you asking that?” Gown cocked his head. “I am okay if you are okay, though!” Just then, he looked up at a space above Lecia’s shoulder. When he turned around again, the friendly smile on his face seemed somehow stiffer.

What on earth was that exchange about? Arcus exchanged a glance with Lecia, but she looked just as confused.

Arcus had no time to dwell on what happened; he needed to show his guests into his estate.

Once all the greetings were done and dusted, Arcus led his visitors inside. They were not greeted by a gorgeous chandelier contoured by two staircases, but an entrance hall that suited the house’s scale. The floor was checkered, and the lighting was provided by wall lamps, powered by Sol Glasses. A painting or two would have done much to glitz up the room, but Arcus had only just moved

in, and hadn't had the time to attend to any decor like that.

Directly across from the entrance was the door to the dining room, and corridors leading to the rest of the rooms were situated to the right and left. The stairway to the second floor began on the left side of the room, curved around the back wall, and reached out to the right, encompassing the entrance hall in a c shape.

Major noble families would use large halls to hold their parties, but that required their estates to be of a certain size. Arcus's estate was only as big as he needed it to be; like your average noble family, his parties would have to be held in the dining room instead.

Leading his guests through the entrance hall, Arcus opened the door to the dining room. There stood Cazzy in his butler uniform.

"E-Er, we have been eagerly, uh, awaiting your arrival...?" Cazzy gave his greeting as arranged, but it sounded awfully clumsy.

Craib sighed, exasperated. "How long are you gonna struggle with the whole servant thing, Guari?"

"I mean, I've been practicin'...but when it comes to actually presentin'..." Cazzy floundered.

Noah bowed. "Please accept our sincerest apologies. I ask that you display some leniency towards Cazzy Guari, as he is still in training."

"Sorry..." Cazzy mumbled.

Clearly, his next challenge would be learning how to address nobility. Everyone here already knew him to a degree, so they would surely let him off, but Arcus needed to make sure he learned the customs properly for next time. Although he did consider that it might erode away a part of Cazzy's personality...

"Cazzy."

"Oh, hey, Lisa! I didn't know ya were here! What gives?"

"I am accompanying Her Ladyship. You know, it is somewhat refreshing to see you acting in this manner."

“Dammit! This blows! I can’t believe ya saw me in this outfit!”

“Oh? I think it’s rather fetching.”

But Cazzy was already groaning in anguish with a hand slapped to his face. He had always been a rebel, so it was no wonder he was embarrassed for his junior from the Institute to see him like this.

Once that brief outburst was over, Arcus showed his guests into the dining room.

Lisa immediately looked up at the ceiling. “This room is rather bright.”

“Yes, My Lady. I remade all of these Sol Glasses myself.”

“Ah, yes. So you excel at engraving seals on top of everything else.”

There was a profound difference in the amount of light a Sol Glass could put out depending on its maker. A skilled engraver could use the carved artglyphs to make something nice and bright, but the majority of Sol Glasses on the market weren’t much brighter than a torch. Only very rich nobles, such as Marquess Gaston, could afford the most dazzling Glasses. Otherwise these brighter variants were placed along main roads and areas in the capital that were worth highlighting, among other important locations. Meanwhile, knowing about fluorescent lighting in the man’s world meant it was easy for Arcus to conjure such bright lights without spending too much money in the process.

On top of the tablecloth, spread across the long table, lay plate after plate of food.

“Wow! I’ve never seen some of this grub!” Deet exclaimed excitedly, his eyes skittering up and down the table.

“Me neither,” Louise hummed.

“Where are these dishes from?” Purce asked Noah.

“They are all dishes which Master Arcus himself came up with.”

“Arcus can cook?”

“Some of these were prepared by our master, but the majority were prepared by Eido, to whom Master Arcus passed the recipes.”

“You made these?” Louise asked Eido, sounding impressed.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it, but I can cook,” Eido answered quietly.

Most of the dishes had been prepared with knowledge from the man’s world. Arcus could never forget the culinary delights he had experienced through that dream, and it had always been his secret ambition to recreate a number of them as soon as he had his own kitchen. Finally, his aspiration had been achieved.

There were no stoves in this world, and heat was hard to control—too hard for an amateur like Arcus. He left the majority of the work to Eido, who was a skilled cook, and managed to recreate the food Arcus wanted based on the recipes he was provided.

Arcus had, however, made most of the sweets himself, after a lot of trial and error.

“Arcus shared a lot of interesting recipes with me,” said Eido. “It was a fun challenge to cook them all.”

“Given up on bein’ a magician altogether, have you?” Craib asked.

“Of course not, but it’s important for magicians to keep focused on their art.”

“How’s cookin’ got anything to do with magic?”

“Both are all about building something from separate parts, and using your imagination.”

“You’re lucky that makes sense. But yeah, the food looks good.”

“His Majesty will regret passing me over to Arcus once he hears how these came out.”

Craib and Eido seemed to be getting on well, even though they hadn’t spoken much before. It was a little disrespectful for them to be speaking about Shinlu like that though. Lisa looked like she very much wanted to reprimand them; Craib’s status being what it was, she was helpless.

“Arcus! Hey, Arcus! What’s this?” Deet asked.

“Castella cake. It’s a type of dessert.”

“It looks super fluffy!” Deet stared, entranced by the cake. The top was a beautiful, mouthwatering caramel color. It wasn’t decorated, so it was already starting to sag, but that didn’t seem to bother Deet, who had probably seen nothing like it before.

Because a large portion of his guests were children, Arcus made sure to provide a bounty of desserts. The man never baked himself, but had seen desserts being baked on TV, and recipes in books. Enough that Arcus had managed to recreate them, though some of his attempts were more successful than others.

The desserts hadn’t just caught Deet’s eye either; Charlotte and Lecia were also deeply curious about the sweet-smelling treats. The candy in this world was mostly just sugar, and otherwise savory snacks were more common—things like boiled sweets or candied sour fruits. Any sort of confectionary from the man’s world was bound to look exotic to children raised in this one.

Sue suddenly spotted something that made her face light up: a glass bowl filled with syrup and fruit. “Wow! Apricot tofu!”

Arcus blinked. “Apricot? You mean almond tofu, right? That’s what it’s called in the recipe I used...”

Sue stared at Arcus blankly. “No, I mean apricot tofu... This *is* made with apricot kernels, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“So it’s apricot tofu.”

It seemed there was a discrepancy between the names the dessert was known by. Arcus had decided to make the dessert after lucking into a supply of the right sort of apricot. It was easier than he’d expected, what with Lainur’s connections to the east. Ingredients from over there were too expensive to eat on a daily basis, but just right for a special occasion like this.

“Why’s it floating on water though?”

“It’s not water, it’s syrup—um, like honey.”

“Honey, huh? That explains why it smells so sweet!” Sue made a show of

appreciating the fragrance, while Lecia peered inside the glass bowl.

“It certainly is pretty.”

“This dessert is often served at parties in Bǎi Liánbāng. It’s even served at the Emperor’s dinners over there.”

“How interesting!”

“I’m guessing it tastes good then!” Sue said.

“Good enough to eat every day,” Arcus promised.

“Wow!” Deet exclaimed.

“Every day?” Lecia gasped. “Oh, I can hardly wait to try some!”

Charlotte was also smiling eagerly at the desserts. “All these sweets have left me craving tea.”

“If you would like some tea, My Lady, you have only to ask,” Arcus said.

Charlotte giggled. “I might ask for some later then.”

Louise surveyed the table. “Where’s this rare liquor of yours, then?”

“I shall prepare it forthwith,” Noah promised.

“Liquor? You got *liquor*, Arcus?” Craib asked accusingly.

“He didn’t tell you, Crucible?”

“Nope. This your doin’, Noah?”

“No. This is entirely the work of Master Arcus.”

Craib’s brow furrowed, and he turned to Arcus. He found himself recoiling slightly, even though he knew Craib wasn’t necessarily scolding him.

“Um, yes, I made it,” he admitted.

“You *made* it? Where? You gotta have a proper facility to brew liquor.”

“Um, I, uh... In your basement, uncle.”

“Wh—You’ve been usin’ my place for *that*, you little brat?”

“Yes...” Arcus tried to laugh it off dryly, but Craib crouched down so he was at eye level and smiled.

“Arcus. I don’t care what you do or where you do it. S’long as you’re not doin’ anythin’ *bad*. All I wanna know is, why didn’t you tell me you were doin’ this? Shouldn’t I have a right to know, as the master of the house? Hm?”

“U-Um...”

His uncle’s smile was incredibly intimidating. Arcus’s gaze flicked left and right, as if to try and escape Craib’s scrutiny.

“Had he told you, Craib, no doubt you would have drunk every last drop of Master Arcus’s concoction the moment it was ready.”

“Ya shoulda seen our master’s face when Noah told him that!” Cazzy cackled.

“G-Guys! Shut up!”

It seemed Arcus’s butlers were intent on colluding to spill the truth. Arcus couldn’t help feeling betrayed that they would reveal something their master wished to keep hidden.

“Wow! Soma wine! I haven’t seen that in ages!” An excited shout from Gown interrupted Craib’s interrogation. The elf’s eyes sparkled as he looked at the cloudy white beverage on the tray.

“Wait, you know about soma wine, Gown?”

“Yeah! A long time ago, kids used to make it for us sprites, and for Wedge and Chain too! The kids who could make it are all gone now, so I haven’t had any in a long, long time, but they always used to offer it to us at the start of the year.”

“Hold on,” Arcus paused. “Does that mean humans aren’t allowed to drink it?”

“No, you’re allowed! But if you make it again, please can I have the first drink of the year? By the way, I like the stuff from the bottom with all the sediment in more than the clear stuff from the top! Like this! It’s perfect!” Gown’s eyes smiled.

“Got it.”

How lucky that Arcus had prepared the drink just to Gown’s tastes without even knowing.

“You oughta go first then, elf,” Craib said, apparently realizing he could no longer have the honor himself.

“Yay! Thanks!” Gown picked up a cup and brought it close to his face. He was...probably drinking it, but since his mouth wasn’t visible, he may as well have been pouring it down his front. Regardless of Arcus’s doubts, Gown’s eyes were soft again. “Yummy!”

“How is it?” Arcus asked.

“Delicious! You made it well.”

“Glad to hear it.” Seeing the earnest joy in Gown’s eyes was enough for Arcus to let out a sigh of relief.

“I guess if the elf likes it, it’s gotta be good,” Craib decided.

“I didn’t realize this was something so extraordinary,” Lecia said.

“Me neither. Who’d have thought it was somethin’ offered to the spirits?” Craib picked up a glass of soma wine from Noah’s tray. “Smells good,” he remarked, before gulping down a mouthful—and then freezing.

Every pair of eyes in the room zeroed in on him.

“Craib?” Noah prompted.

“Uncle?” Arcus asked, but there was no response.

“I hope you will leave enough for everybody,” Noah said.

“O-O-Of course I will! Wh-What kinda boozehound do you take me for?!”

Noah elected not to reply.

Clearly, the drink had rattled Craib. Another pause, and then he was gulping down the rest of his glass. He let out a small cough, and when he spoke again, his tone was unnecessarily frank. “I’m afraid this is something too complex to be left in the hands of a child. Therefore, I will be confiscating the entire supply and taking care of it myself.”

Far from being moved by his sense of responsibility, everyone’s gaze turned cold.

“Craib,” Noah sighed.

“You can’t take it, uncle!”

“Shut up and hand it over! I can’t let you guys hog somethin’ that tastes as good as *this*!”

Purce’s eyes narrowed with interest. “Oh? If this drink has earned the acclaim of both Gown *and* Crucible, it must be something special indeed.”

“No, it tastes like crap actually!”

“No one’s going to believe you now, uncle...” Arcus informed his stubborn uncle.

Noah now had a fresh tray of wine in his hand; Arcus hadn’t even noticed him disappear. “My Lord. My Lady. I have here plenty of wine for the both of you.”

“When the hell did you pick that up, Noah?”

Noah had somehow managed to slip the new drink right past Craib. There was no outwitting a skilled butler.

Purce and Louise each picked up a glass of the slightly cloudy liquid.

“Mom! I want some!” Deet cried.

“Nope, you’re too young. Stay outta this.”

“No fair! How come you only treat me like a kid when it’s to stop me having fun?!”

While the Rustinell duo quarreled, Purce took his first sip. “Hmnngh!” His eyes flew open, and then he took another. “It’s scandalous to think a mere child brewed this!”

“You say that, but you’re drinkin’ it like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Whoa. This is delicious! I knew you said I’d enjoy it, but this is way beyond what I expected!” Louise expressed her excitement in a different way. Though she made an effort to savor the smell and the taste, her glass was empty in no time at all. “Do you think I could order this from you?”

“Um... I’m not sure about that, I’m afraid.”

Arcus was eager to distribute his soma wine as a luxury item, but he would need to consult any distributors first. The first barrel would be reserved for

Gown and other spirits, but after that he wasn't sure where to start. He was about to explain, when Lisa interrupted.

"I'll have to ask you to refrain, My Lady."

"Why, Lisa? Would that be a problem?"

"Your Ladyship may have already noticed this, but this drink has the effect of restoring one's aether."

"Aether? What?"

"Goodness me..." Purce gasped.

"Ooh, yeah, I thought that was what I felt," Craib said, studying his glass.

"How did you know, Lisa?"

"I was informed by Count Rain."

Now that she mentioned him, Arcus remembered that Eulid had been there when he drank soma wine on the battlefield. What with both him and Lisa being officials and having close ties to the royal family, it was no wonder they had a chance to exchange information like this.

"Oh. I guess you'll be needing to discuss this at the Magician's Guild first, then?"

"Specifically regarding that beverage—and only that beverage—I believe so, yes."

Arcus stepped in before Lisa and Louise could sound out each other even further. "Excuse me, My Lady, but I worry things are progressing a little too quickly. I haven't yet ascertained the exact effects of the drink."

"We know that it restores aether, which is extremely pertinent, no matter how small the amount. You shall be the one in trouble if this is not thoroughly discussed. In fact, there is a chance you shall be scolded for not reporting it earlier."

"That is because I haven't yet finished collating the documentation. Since this drink promotes the production of aether physically, it is likely to be treated as a kind of medicine, so first I need to carry out the appropriate studies to make

sure it really *does* restore aether as I suspect. Once I have managed that much, I must consider the differences between individual reactions to the drink, as well as the possibility of allergies. Not to mention the presence of alcohol, which greatly limits the beverage's practicality. I haven't even perfected a stable brewing method yet, so it is too early to decide whether I am at a stage where it is worth reporting at all."

"Hm... I am afraid I'm unfamiliar with such technical talk."

Technical? Arcus wasn't convinced, but Lisa took the opportunity to pause and reclaim her lost voice. "You should know that a report will be necessary from the moment His Majesty hears of this drink's effects, and it is inevitable that this becomes a matter for the Guild. A drink which can restore aether is unheard of. From a security perspective, this cannot be allowed to leak outside our borders before it is fully implemented. Don't you agree?"

"That's...true."

"Meanwhile, I'm standing right here," Louise pointed out with a grin.

"Please, take this seriously, My Lady. Your Ladyship is a vassal who has earned His Majesty's trust. Furthermore, to keep quiet at this point would do nothing to restore your ignorance. I am more concerned about discussing this in the presence of Gown."

"Uh... Oh, yeah..." Arcus gulped.

The elf had only just explained the beverage's sacred status. And now Arcus was going on about its manufacture like it was a product to market; not a particularly wise move. Gown, on the other hand, was too busy sipping at his wine to show any concern.

"Arcus Raytheft. I shall do what I must to stop this information spreading further. As for the handling of this beverage, I shall—" Lisa suddenly stopped, and her gaze wandered for a second before coming back to rest on Arcus. "Ahem. I ask that you consult with His Royal Highness, and make a hasty decision regarding the management of this product. Agreed?"

"Yes, My Lady. Thank you very much for your consideration."

Lisa may have sounded strict, but Arcus was grateful that she was willing to

work with him nonetheless.

Cazzy held out a glass to her. “Here, this one’s yours.”

“C-Cazzy. Thank you...” Lisa took it from him graciously, a complete turn from her rigid attitude she displayed just moments before. It made Arcus wonder about the power dynamic in their relationship.

“Hey, Cazzy. Do you have some dirt on Count Lauzei or something?”

“Hm? I dunno if I’d call it dirt, but I sure have a *ton* of embarrassin’ stories!”

“C-Cazzy!”

Cazzy cackled while Lisa let out a panicked cry.

Sue smiled and took a step closer. “What’s this? I wanna hear too!”

“Your—I mean, ma’am!”

Cazzy began to speak, his tone nostalgic. “Apparently, right, she didn’t have too many friends at the start. Like, she literally couldn’t make *any* till I spoke to her. Probably ’cause of her status, or that rod up her butt, or her lack of social skills... Y’know, that kinda thing—”

“Cazzy! A lot has changed!”

“She was bad at adaptin’ to stuff too. Like she’d go ’round beatin’ up these fancy noble kids by accident.”

“I’ll have you know I’m much better at restraining my power now! And nobody holds that against me anymore!”

“There’s tons of stuff. Probably the best story is when she came cryin’ to me about how she was crap at studyin’ magic, like there was snot all over her face, and—”

Cazzy’s relentless tales were too much, and Lisa snapped.

“Waaah! Please *stop* already!”

Even Arcus was starting to feel bad for her. “Sh-Shall we raise a toast?”

Once everyone was at their seat, he began to pour drinks. Leaving the adults to Noah, he poured for Sue, Charlotte, Deet, and Lecia in turn. Then it was time

to decide who should lead the toast. Arcus was the host, of course, but at times like this it was usually better to defer those with status. He started by asking among the adults.

“This is a party to celebrate your victory. I played no part in it, so it should not come down to me,” Purce said.

“I only showed up part way through, so I don’t really count,” said Craib.

“I guess I’ll do it, then. I’ll make it a quick one so we don’t bore the children.” Louise raised her glass. “Let us drink to our kingdom’s glory, and to His Royal Highness, Prince Ceylan Crosellode’s victory!”

There were shouts of “cheers” as the guests joined in, marking a true start to the celebrations.

After the reserved toast, it was Sue and Charlotte’s turn to taste the soma wine.

“Wow! This is great!”

“It certainly is.”

The girls’ eyes widened in surprise before both of them let out a contented sigh. Apparently neither had expected it to taste as good as it did. They instantly acquired a taste for the wine, and continued to drink eagerly from their glasses, their faces alight.

Meanwhile, Deet and Lecia both had a taste—then frowned and shook their heads.

“This stuff tastes weird,” Deet said.

“Strange,” Lecia agreed, “but not sour, like grape wine.”

“I guess you guys aren’t ready for it yet,” Arcus said.

Apart from anything else, were this the man’s world, drinking alcohol at their age would be illegal.

Arcus made to pass them some fruit-infused water to wash the taste out, but then panic flashed across Lecia’s face.

“N-No, thank you, brother. I would like another glass of wine, please.”

“Come on now. You don’t have to force yourself.”

Lecia’s request came despite the fact she hadn’t emptied her first glass yet. Arcus suspected she was doing her best to enjoy the beverage made by her brother, but he wasn’t about to force it on her. He was also exceedingly curious about the fact that both Sue and Charlotte were enjoying it.

“Why don’t you have some dessert instead? Alcohol isn’t something you should make yourself drink.”

Lecia’s mind was off the drink the moment he mentioned dessert. She’d probably been looking forward to those sweets more than anything else on the table. Her eyes wandered indecisively over the vast variety, but Deet pointed at the castella cake right away.

“I’m gonna have this fluffy one here!”

“Sure. Cazzy.” Arcus gave the signal to Cazzy to cut the round cake, which he did with a nod.

On the top was a beautiful caramel-colored layer. The cake’s cross section revealed a moist, delicate sponge, and the sweet fragrance of milk and eggs wafted through the air.

Deet took a bite of the cake the moment the plate was placed in front of him, and after chewing once, then twice: “Whooooooooooooa!” He leaped to his feet, letting out his surprise in the form of a cry. “It’s amazing! Incredible! I’ve never tasted anything like this!”

“O-Oh yeah? Glad to hear it...” Though he was taken aback by the intensity of Deet’s joy, Arcus managed to respond with a smile and a nod. Making these desserts was definitely worth it if they were going to delight his friends this much.

Lecia had her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide.

“Is it good, Lecia?”

Lecia’s head bobbed up and down enthusiastically. When she had finished her mouthful, the surprise on her face was even clearer. “It’s incredibly delicious!”

“I’m glad you like it, Lecia.”

“I really do!” Lecia smiled, prompting Arcus to smile back.

“Can I have more, Arcus?” Deet asked. Clearly, he had been taken with the cake’s light fluffiness.

“Sure. There’s plenty left, so don’t feel like you have to hold back.” Arcus motioned to the waiter he’d hired to bring out another plate. The second cake wasn’t as nicely browned as the first, nor did it have as much structural integrity, but it would taste the same.

Both Deet and Lecia beamed when it arrived, and they started chatting excitedly with one another about how delicious it was.

“Your desserts really taste that good, huh? Guess I’ll be sending you a list of requests,” Sue said.

“Arcus, I daresay I shall be inviting you to my next tea party,” Charlotte giggled.

Arcus gawked at the girls. In truth, his repertoire of desserts was extremely limited, and he’d have preferred not to have that exposed.

“Yay! Dessert!” Gown was filling his plate with various desserts, his eyes narrowed in a smile.

“You prefer to eat dessert too, Gown?” Arcus asked.

“Yeah! I like dessert better than main courses!”

“Oh, good. There’s plenty, so have as much as you’d like.”

“Thanks! Let’s eat together!” Gown called excitedly to Lecia and Deet, who responded with a cheer, and the three of them began to tackle the supply of sweets. They exchanged excited opinions on which they liked best.

Meanwhile, the adults were tucking into the side dishes prepared alongside the wine.

“I am unfamiliar with the majority of these flavors, yet all of them are exquisite,” Purce said.

“I still can’t believe that guy can cook. Where’d he learn?”

Louise laughed. “Galanger and the others would hate him for this. By the way,

I know of an excellent accompaniment to this wine.”

“Yes, My Lady?” Arcus said.

“That medal—the one you got the other day.”

“Ah. I was deeply humbled to receive such an honor, given my age.”

“Now you’re just being modest.”

“I heard the details myself,” Purce agreed. “Such feats, all performed within your first campaign. You deserve that order through and through.”

“If you ask me, you deserved more than that. His Majesty must have struggled when it came to your reward. Did you hear anything about that, Crucible?” Louise inquired.

“Nah, I was summoned, but His Majesty just listened to my report.”

“Our foreign visitors spoke a lot about you at the dinner too,” Louise said. “Especially the envoys from the north; they were *very* curious about you. They were wondering what exactly you did to earn that order, and what that other achievement that was mentioned was all about.”

Lisa stepped in. “My Lady. Please remember that Arcus Raytheft’s activities are an open secret.”

“Oh yes? I guess that means this is about exactly what I think it is.”

“Its official announcement to Your Ladyship will come in time. Please understand that His Majesty is acting with all due prudence for the moment.”

“Yeah, I know. I’d need to be an official lord of Lainur to know all the details. And I don’t think that’s where His Majesty wants me.”

“Indeed.”

“I’m just thinking about those guests from the north, and their behavior. I suspect the Iron Rose and those around her may have worked it all out by now.”

“Then please know that we at the Surveillance Office are acting as we see fit.”

Though the Surveillance Office was on the case, Arcus also had his own counterintelligence measures in place. He’d broken up his production line in the

Magician's Guild, each step separated and in close quarters with similar departments; only an expert eye would be able to separate them out from business as usual and piece together what it was all *for*.

As for the Iron Rose, Meifa Darnénes, it was quite possible she had already picked up on what was going on during the chaotic happenings in the capital—or so Noah and Cazzy would report later.

Craib turned to Arcus. "I feel like I gotta tell you this before it's too late...but I guess you already know what I'm gonna say."

"What is it, uncle?"

"You gotta be careful goin' forward, for all kinds of reasons. Let your guard down, and before y'know it, you won't be able to play the rebellious kid card anymore."

Hearing their uncle's words, Lecia inclined her head. "What might you mean by that, uncle?"

"Listen, Lecia. Not everythin' in life goes as easy as people want it to, and there are ways of making sure they learn that lesson." Craib looked at Arcus. "You get what I'm on about, right?"

Arcus nodded confidently. "Yes. For example, somebody may be gifted a large sum of money without the royal family's consent, or get sent medals and letters of commendation behind its back, or even be appointed to an official position... These are all things that can lead to that person letting their guard down. And if word of that spreads..."

These were all things which sowed mistrust. A few minor accolades here and there were no big deal, but the more they happened, the deeper that mistrust went, for those closest to a country's leadership were naturally cautious and skeptical people. If Arcus messed up, there was a chance Shinlu would be forced to punish him, whether the king wanted to or not.

There was no such thing as excessive caution.

"I'll be careful," Arcus promised, "and I'll let the other state magicians know not to say too much either. Noah, Cazzy, could I ask you two to handle that?"

“Of course.”

“I’ll do what I can!” Cazzy cackled.

His cheeks full with castella cake, Deet frowned. “Dealing with that kinda stuff sure sounds like a pain.”

“It comes from being successful,” said Arcus. “Once people get the whiff of money from you, they come swarming in like locusts. They think they can use you, so they advance, strip you to the bone, then leave. It might happen to you too.”

“Huh?”

“He’s saying that if something happened to me or Lihito, there’d be a ton of people who would try and swindle you.”

Deet shrugged and shook his head. “I dunno about dad, but nothing could ever happen to you, mom!”

“What did you say? Care to repeat yourself?” Louise poked Deet in the forehead, a punishment for taking the conversation too lightly.

“Ow!”

The two of them never changed.

Sue picked up the pitcher of soma wine and came to sit beside Arcus, apparently having taken note of his empty glass.

“Here, Arcus.” She made to pour him another drink.

Normally it would be discourteous to let someone who outranked him refill his glass, but he and Sue had an understanding that outweighed rank.

“Sorry, I think I’ve had enough.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t wanna drink too much.”

Arcus was the host. He couldn’t risk losing himself to drunkenness.

Sue looked unimpressed, and she pouted at him. “Hmph. Fine, you don’t want to accept my drink. I see how it is.”

“C’mon, this isn’t some office party; I’m not trying to make a social statement. Besides, it’s not *your* drink. I made it.”

Suddenly, the two friends were back to their lighthearted, bickering selves.

Sue looked around the table. “By the way, have you got any main courses around here?”

“Hm? Yeah, I do.”

All that was on the table at the moment were desserts and side dishes, but Arcus had of course prepared some bigger dishes to satiate his guests’ hunger. He motioned to the waiter once again, who brought dishes protected by a dome and baskets filled with steamed buns.

Arcus had to admit, the order in which the food was served at his party was unconventional, given that he’d started with dessert. He doubted the children, with their inexperienced palates, would care much. Children weren’t concerned with the order in which they ate; they were just happy to eat anything that tasted good.

Lecia’s eyes sparked when she caught sight of the buns. “Might those be duck sandwiches? I heard they’re very popular downtown.”

“Have you ever tried them, Lecia?” asked Arcus.

“Yes, at restaurants, but never directly from a stall in the capital.”

“They’re famous, right? I’ve only tried them once, and that was kinda recently,” Deet said.

“There isn’t much opportunity to indulge downtown,” Lecia said.

“Yeah...” Deet let out a disappointed sigh.

Lecia didn’t often get the chance to wander downtown, and Deet lived all the way in Rustinell. Neither of them were in a position to go out and buy duck sandwiches on a whim.

Sue beamed at them. “But you can have them right here and now!”

“Yes, we can, can’t we?”

“Plus, Arcus made these, so they gotta be good!”

“Sorry,” Arcus cut in before they could get too ahead of themselves, “but these aren’t exactly what you’re used to.”

“Huh? What d’you mean?” Deet asked.

“If I’m honest with you guys, I don’t really ‘get’ the duck sandwich. I mean, sure, duck and brown sauce tastes great, but...” Arcus began.

Sue scowled at him. “You tryin’ to pick a fight with me? I *love* duck sandwiches!”

“I know. Well, just give these a try anyway. I think you’ll see what I’m trying to say.” Arcus removed the domes from one of the dishes, releasing a whoosh of rich fragrance.

Sue gawked wordlessly at what lay underneath.

“Whoa! Check it out! It’s meat!” Deet exclaimed, his eyes pouring over the thick cuts of meat.

“But...not duck, so far as I can tell. Might that be pork?” Lecia eyed the dish curiously.

Sue’s eyes had now widened, as though she were staring at a creature that exceeded her wildest imagination. “Arcus... I can’t believe it!”

“You recognize it, huh? I thought you might.”

Sue’s recognition meant they likely served this meat in Bǎi Liánbāng, much like the almond tofu from earlier. The many similarities between the man’s world and this one often surprised Arcus, although he supposed it shouldn’t—he was already aware of how much Lainur’s culture resembled that of the west.

Eyes sparkling with excitement, Sue closed in on Arcus. “How do *you* know about this? It doesn’t make sense!”

“Maybe not to you...”

“But you’ve never been to Bǎi Liánbāng, have you? So there’s no way you should know about this!”

“Who says I haven’t been?”

“Wait... You have?”

“No.”

“See?!”

“L-Look, maybe it makes more sense than you think it does!”

“What does that mean?!”

For once, Arcus was the one perplexing Sue—although, he had to admit that she was right: it didn’t make sense.

It was just as Lecia expected. The cuts of meat spread across the plate were pork. Boneless ribs, to be precise, stewed in a fermented fish sauce and served between two buns. Essentially it was a replica of Dongpo pork, a Chinese specialty in the man’s world.

“Kòuròugēbāo...” Sue murmured as she stared at the stewed pork. Arcus assumed it was a word from Bǎi Liánbāng. “I’ve only ever had these once,” she explained, “when I went to Bǎi Liánbāng.”

“Really? I feel like a duke’s daughter should be able to eat this stuff whenever she wants.”

“I don’t know the recipe, and I have no clue *what* it’s made from either,” Sue said, never taking her eyes off the pork. It looked like she was about to start drooling at any second.

In the man’s world, it was a simple matter to pick up a packet of pork from the supermarket. Here, farming livestock did not yet extend to pigs; ducks were the biggest animal you could expect to find being reared for their meat, if that. Pork was difficult enough to find in the first place, especially if you were after a particular cut. Ask anybody here what pork loin or ribs were, and unless they were a professional chef, they likely couldn’t tell you.

That was precisely why the girls were marveling at the meat.

Cazzy, who was busy entertaining Lisa, cackled. “This one dish took longer than anythin’ else to make!”

“Indeed. Master Arcus was very particular about the seasoning, and carried out several experiments using duck meat to begin with.”

“I swear he’s spent more time holed up in the kitchen with Eido than studyin’

magic lately!”

“And I was grateful for it,” Eido said. “It was a real boon to my culinary studies.”

“Yeah, and the stuff itself tastes great!” Cazzy said.

“Duck sandwiches are delicious,” Arcus said. “But I’m convinced they’re just a copy of this: the real deal.”

“That’s right,” said Sue. “It was all thanks to the king from three generations ago. He went to Bǎi Liánbāng, and the meat he had there left a massive impression on him. The duck sandwich was his attempt at recreating the taste.”

“I thought so.”

Arcus had always suspected as much from the first time he ever laid eyes on the duck sandwich. The bun part originated in the east, but the filling was very much based in western cuisine. The brown sauce was unique, as though something created via a process of trial and error.

Eido filled one of the buns with meat, poured on plenty of sauce, and added a garnish of mustard to one side of the plate, before placing it in front of Sue. She simply stared at it, like a treasure hunter presented with a particularly precious artifact. The dark amber sauce poured over the thick cuts of meat made it look devastatingly appetizing.

Sue gulped, took the bun in her hand, and took a delicate bite out of it. She let the flavors spill out over her tongue, before her head drooped so low she was in danger of hitting it on the table.

“It’s delicious... Not identical to what I had in Bǎi Liánbāng, but the flavors are definitely eastern... Mmngh.” Her words were even punctuated with a soft growl, before she started muttering about serving it at her own dinner parties, her mind now clearly more on politics than the food itself.

Deet had been waiting eagerly in his seat like an excitable puppy when Arcus finally handed him a bun of his own.

“Hnnngh! This is so good!” he exclaimed over and over after taking the very first bite. The powerful seasoning, the umami of the pork, and the stickiness of

the sauce all combined to overload his brain with bliss. At least, that was what Arcus suspected was the cause of his diminished lexicon.

When Craib ate his bun, there was a soft nostalgic look in his eye. “Yeah... I know this taste.”

“Have you had this dish before, uncle?”

“I once stayed in Bǎi Liánbāng for about a year. Had it quite a lot. Yours tastes better than what I had over there, though. Their meat’s too dry.”

“I did my best to make it as good as possible.”

Arcus had followed the Japanese recipe, pre-steaming the pork so that it was extra soft. The seasoning was just as it would be in the man’s world, which was more than enough to suit Craib’s tastes. Arcus was once again reminded how wonderful the cookbooks in that other world were.

Louise and Purce each enjoyed a bun as they conversed with Craib.

“You decided not to settle in Bǎi Liánbāng, Crucible?”

“I did get asked to...”

“Your popularity never wavers,” Purce remarked.

“There were way too many problems for me to even consider it.”

“Hm? Like what?” Louise asked.

Craib sighed wearily. “You compare their palace to the one here; theirs is shady as heck. Doesn’t matter who y’are, tryin’ to settle over there’s dangerous. I wanted to come back here, honestly.”

“So you told them to shove it and ran?”

Craib nodded and let out another sigh. If a state magician with *his* fighting prowess was calling it dangerous, you knew things were serious.

“What, even *you* were scared?” Cazzy asked.

“Anyone attacked me directly, I’d have been fine. Thing is, not everyone over there likes to play fair.”

“Surely you would have perceived the nearby aether of any would-be

assassins?” Noah asked.

“What, y’mean keepin’ my guard up night after night? Why don’t you go down there, see how you like it? I’d have died from lack of sleep before any assassins got to me.”

Noah’s gaze turned sympathetic.

It sounded to Arcus as though Bǎi Liánbāng really did have a lot in common with ancient China. During that exchange, he passed a bun to Charlotte.

“Arcus,” she called out of the blue.

“Yes, My Lady. What can I do for you?”

Her eyes were oddly out of focus, though she had been chatting quite comfortably just a second ago. The alcohol must have been taking effect. Her cheeks were a little pink. Arcus had the sense that he shouldn’t have said anything—but it was too late now.

“I have something I wish to ask you!”

“Wh-What might that be?”

“Why is your speech so stiff when it comes to me?”

“Well... The Cremelia House outranks my own, and even on a personal level, Your Ladyship outranks me by far.”

“Yet you speak to Lady Susia without reservation! Do you not find that a little odd?”

“Um, well, I’ve always spoken to Sue like this, so it would be stranger to change that after all this time.”

“In that case, would you be able to speak with me in the same manner?”

“I would feel terribly ungracious—”

“Ungracious?! So you are saying you can never feel comfortable with me?”

“Not exactly.”

“Enough excuses!”

Arcus stared. What on earth did she want from him? Charlotte was now

taking a refined bite from her bun and chewing it aggressively, as if to vent her irritation. She was glaring at Arcus too, something he felt she wouldn't be doing were it not for the alcohol.

"Listen to me. From this day forward, you are not to address me as 'My Lady.' Nor are you to speak so formally."

"I understand your request, but it would reflect poorly on me to make light of a superior in that way, whether I have Your Ladyship's permission or not."

"In that case, you may limit your casual speech to the occasions where there is nobody around to reproach you. Understood?"

Evidently, Charlotte was an angry drunk. Switching to familiar speech with somebody you were used to treating with respect so suddenly was no easy task, and yet Arcus knew if he tried to convince Charlotte of that, they would get absolutely nowhere.

"O-Okay. How's this?" Arcus spoke in the friendliest, most cheerful tone he could muster.

"You still look somewhat stiff. You will need to try harder than that."

Apparently his efforts fell short. He had thought simply *speaking* more casually would be enough, but now Charlotte was critiquing his body language too. Talk about unreasonable.

"Hang in there, bro."

"I'm sure you're not far off!"

Deet and Lecia were still happily munching on their pork buns together. They were clearly more interested in the food than offering any genuine encouragement.

"Dammit. You guys really wanna hang me out here to dry, huh?" Arcus grunted, glowering at the pair.

"Arcus," Sue began. "Y'know, I think you should stop forcing it."

"Huh?"

"It's not easy to change the way you talk to someone just like that, after all."

But Sue's support only drew Charlotte's ire; the count's daughter glared daggers at her. "Lady Susia. I am currently in conversation with Arcus, and I would be most grateful if Your Ladyship could keep out of it."

"I get that, but all I'm saying is that you shouldn't try and *make* him do anything. He's in a position where he has to do whatever you say, right? So it's only gonna make him uncomfortable."

"Tch..."

"Says the world's pushiest girl," Arcus muttered, but Charlotte and Sue were too busy glaring at each other. Terrified about the war about to break out, Arcus looked to Noah for help.

"How wonderful it must be to be fought over by two beautiful maidens."

"It's not 'wonderful' and you know it!"

Was he being obtuse on purpose? As was often the case, Noah didn't react to Arcus's scathing retort, instead picking up the water pitcher before swiftly making his escape. Arcus was under no illusions that his butler was suddenly overcome with the urge to make sure his guests were properly watered; he was being abandoned, pure and simple.

"It's never good to force anything, is it, Arcus?" Sue asked sweetly as she stepped in close to him.

"H-Hey!"

Her chin came to rest on his shoulder, and her arms slinked around his neck in a way that was needlessly clingy. Sue wasn't even that drunk; she was just trying to rile up Charlotte, who was. But then Arcus felt her hands on his cheeks, and he realized this might be more about teasing him than bothering Charlotte.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Charlotte demanded.

"Nothing? Arcus and I are always like this around each other."

"My word! Was I not taught the same standards as other noble children?! Arcus!"

"She's lying, My Lady! We are *not* 'always like this'!"

“I told you to stop calling me ‘My Lady’!”

“Wait, but did you hear what I said?!”



Arcus was in a daze. How on earth had this conversation devolved into such a mess?

“Wow, Arcus! You’re a hit with the ladies!” Deet cheered, clapping his hands.

“Brother, I must say this all seems very inappropriate!” Lecia’s cheeks puffed up indignantly.

Arcus glanced at their glasses. Both were filled with soma wine, and both their faces were flushed. “Who the heck let you guys drink more?!”

“It was me! If you have a complaint, Arcus Raytheft, I’m all ears!”

“L-Lady Lauzei!”

Lisa’s face was bright red, and she was much further gone than Charlotte.

“I’m surrounded by drunkards!” Arcus lamented.

Lisa was supposed to be here as Sue’s guardian; surely she couldn’t fulfill her duties in this state? Arcus turned to the man who he thought had been keeping an eye on her.

“Cazzy.”

“She loves her booze,” he explained. “She just doesn’t handle it good. ‘N’ then she starts causin’ trouble.”

“It’s not my fault!” Lisa whined, clinging on to Cazzy.

“See?” Cazzy said with a shrug.

Lisa’s sharp, drunk gaze turned on Arcus then. “Arcus Raytheft! I have something to say to you!”

“O-Of course, My Lady! What might that be?”

“I’m *jealous* of you!”

“Huh? I beg your pardon?”

“You protected His Royal Highness during the fighting, a feat every noble in this kingdom dreams of! They should all be jealous of you!”

Her outburst seemed to come from nowhere...until Arcus realized it might have been connected to their conversation from when she had just arrived. He

noticed then that his actions had struck a chord with her.

“Do you know how many people would have loved to fulfill that duty?! To achieve such success?! I wish I could have been in your shoes...”

Arcus understood what she was actually saying: She wanted to die protecting the prince. That was quite the statement for someone as young as her, but he put it down to her strict upbringing as a Lauzei.

“I just so happened to be by His Royal Highness’s side—”

“Don’t be ridiculous! What utter nonsense! You could never have protected His Royal Highness had you not mustered up the resolve to do so in the first place! You know what Count Bowe did, in the conflict’s final stages! He fled from the mere *rumor* of Bague Gruba’s presence, before the beast had even made an appearance! You, on the other hand, fought to the very last to protect His Royal Highness, and I heard you even stood up to Gruba!”

“Only because I was scared of him.”

“Then why did you face him? That sounds like a contradiction to me.”

“Well, I sort of thought...if I didn’t defeat him, we’d all die, you see.” Arcus found it difficult to explain exactly what his feelings were at the time. Bague had inspired an overwhelming terror in him, and before he knew what he was doing, he had leaped forwards.

His awkward explanation hadn’t satisfied Lisa either; she was drinking more wine, muttering about how it “didn’t make sense,” and how “jealous” she was. A unique feature of speaking with drunk people: often it was like you were on two completely separate pages. Cazzy was now trying to get Lisa to drink enough water.

“I have something to say to you too, brother!” Lecia announced.

“Yeah?”

Lecia got up from her seat and walked closer to him. Why she couldn’t tell him from where she had been sitting, he wasn’t sure.

Once she was right in front of him, she stretched out her arms and pulled him into a tight hug.

“H-Hey...” Though Lecia caught him off guard, Arcus returned her embrace, as she nuzzled her cheek against him.

“I haven’t seen you in so long,” she murmured, her voice tinged with anxiety.

“Yeah. I’m glad I got to see you again tonight.”

“Me too,” Lecia murmured softly, as Arcus caressed her head gently.

His sister really was too adorable.

But then she averted her gaze sullenly. “I wanted to speak with you more, brother. It’s so rare we get to see each other nowadays, and now that we’ve finally managed it, you’re so busy entertaining everybody else...”

“Yeah... It really has been ages. Look, I might be busy tonight, but I’ll make some time for you soon, and we’ll chat about whatever you want.”

“You promise?”

Arcus nodded.

“I also have something I wish to say, Arcus!” Charlotte cried. She was at it too. Again.

“Of course, My—”

Charlotte glared.

“—Charlotte, what is it?”

“Arcus. I would like you to visit one of our training halls.”

“Training hall? For rapier fencing?”

“Correct. I have wanted a bout with you for a long time. Let us compete.”

“Compete? U-Um...”

“Let us compete.”

“Um...”

“Arcus.”

“O-Okay. I’ll get in touch when I have some free time.”

“And I shall ask father for permission after the party.”

So that was decided—without any room for Arcus’s opinion.

Said father was currently engaged in a drinking contest with Craib and Louise, and had missed the entire chain of disturbances surrounding the children. Responsible adults, they were not. At this rate, Arcus would be down an entire barrel of soma wine before the night was out. None of the three were displaying any drunken behavior either; their tolerances must have been through the roof.

Seeing that the adults were a safer bet, Arcus moved over to them the moment he got the chance.

“Couldn’t take the heat, huh?” Craib grinned.

“They are too drunk to bear at this point, I’m afraid,” Arcus admitted. He was frightened of what other commitments he might be drawn into if he continued conversing with them.

“Arcus. There’s something I would like to ask you,” Purce said.

Not again...

“Of course, My Lord.”

“I realize this is not an entirely elegant matter to discuss at such a celebration, however... It concerns the question I asked you before.”

“About my actions from here on out, My Lord?”

“That’s right.” Purce nodded. “Had your only accomplishment been the matter you presented at the Guild, you would still have plenty of time to decide. However, you are now in possession of a Cross.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“These accomplishments—most noble children who achieved similar would be much older. To put it bluntly, you no longer have the time to be indecisive. You need to have lifelong principles in order, and work out a strategy to live up to them if you have not done so already. I understand it will be a difficult process, but that does not mean I have time to wait, for those around you shall not wait either.”

Purce was right. The bestowal of Arcus’s order meant his name would now be

spread far and wide. Essentially, he had thrown himself into a raging stream. The discussion he had with Craib aside, there was a chance those around him were plotting against him even now. Plotting to destroy him, or to entice him over to their side.

Whichever it was, sitting back and letting it happen would mean his downfall, hence Purce's warning to make sure he was adequately prepared for the coming storm.

"I am sincerely grateful for your concern, My Lord."

"You are most welcome. May I hear your response?" Purce asked, his gaze deeply scrutinizing.

"My intention is to devote myself to working for His Royal Highness."

"Oh yes?"

"Before the recent conflict, I was summoned by His Royal Highness to work by his side. At the time, His Royal Highness added that it would be for the purpose of furthering my achievements, and I was not confident that was a just motivation." Arcus paused; Purce sensed he had more to say.

"Continue."

"Even as I joined the conflict, my thoughts failed to settle. We spoke of Bague Gruba before; although it could be said that I protected His Royal Highness from the beast, the truth was I did nothing but advance recklessly in a fit of fear," Arcus said. "But then there was the clash with the Black Panther Cavalry. His Royal Highness protected both the imperial guard and myself, speaking of protecting the kingdom and its people. That moment stuck with me. It was His Royal Highness's willingness to protect his subjects that allowed me to devote everything I had to protecting His Royal Highness in turn then."

It wasn't because Ceylan tried to do "the right thing" which inspired Arcus to put his life on the line for the prince. It was because he vowed to protect his people, despite the desperate situation he was in. Arcus deeply respected that show of devotion, and that was the moment in which his own desire to protect the prince was born.

"Is that your reason for wanting to work under His Royal Highness?"

“Yes, My Lord. As you have mentioned, I have never given thought to my endeavors past fulfilling my goal. However, if I would work for somebody, I could accept nobody other than His Royal Highness.”

“It is a noble’s duty to follow the royal family. It is unacceptable that you experienced doubt in that duty. However, I am willing to pretend you mentioned nothing of it.”

Louise grimaced a little as she heard Purce’s words before chuckling. “You tryin’ to scare his socks off? Aren’t we lucky our esteemed friend over there is blind drunk?”

Said esteemed friend was currently bickering with Cazzy and calling him names at the top of her voice.

“Once my goal is achieved, I shall devote everything else I have to serving His Royal Highness.”

“You seem to have found your answer, and so there is nothing more for me to say. I can only warn you to be doubly sure you do nothing to sully the name of His Royal Highness.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Craib leaned back, looking up at the ceiling and taking a sip from his glass. “Just remember who His Royal Highness’s dad is, yeah?”

“Uncle?”

“I was just thinkin’, His Royal Highness has definitely inherited his dad’s will. That guy always looks like he don’t care about a thing, right, but it’s an act; on the inside he’s a real passionate man. I’ve heard him say stuff like how there’s no way he’ll ever throw Lainur’s people over to the Empire. It’s not a new thing either. He’s been like that as long as I’ve known him,” Craib said softly, describing his longtime friend.

Purce’s expression was stern. “Crucible. I understand you are a friend of His Majesty’s, but I must object to you referring to him as ‘that guy.’”

“W-Would you let me off tonight, Milord? This is a party.”

“This is not something limited to tonight, Crucible, in fact—”

“La la la! Can’t hear you!”

“Call yourself a state magician?” Louise guffawed, clutching at her belly.

Making an incidental glance to his side, Arcus noticed Sue, red-faced and staring at the floor. “Sue?”

“Huh? Ah...ha ha ha! ‘That guy’! He looks like he’s had way too much to drink!”

Arcus doubted Craib was that susceptible to alcohol, but perhaps it had kicked in all of a sudden. Though it did feel very sudden.

Arcus tried to address Sue again after that, but she was pointedly turned away from him, alternating between gulping down glasses of soma wine and water, without paying any mind to him at all. It was a mystery indeed.

“Cazzy! Don’t you remember promising we’d do our best together for the kingdom when you graduated? Gaaargh!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. My bad...”

Lisa was *still* getting into drunken spats with Cazzy. Running the Surveillance Office must have been a stressful vocation indeed.

“You’re not too hard on Lady Lauzei, are you, Sue?”

“I... I don’t *think* so.” Sue lowered her voice and began to mutter, “Maybe I *have* been giving her too much work to worry about.”

“Noah, could you set aside a little wine for Lady Lauzei to take home?”

“Certainly.”

“And you, Cazzy. You should drink with her from time to time.”

“Are you *kiddin’*? I know what she’s like, but she’s high society, y’know? ‘N’ I’m just some commoner. There’s no way I’d even be *allowed* to drink with her.”

“You’re abandoning me, Cazzy?! Waaaaaaaaah!”

“Jeez, you’re such a pain in the a—butt!”

The alcohol flowed, putting the guests in high spirits and the party in full swing. The time seemed to fly by as Arcus entertained his drunken guests.

The party was over, and the guests had gone home. Since every guest was brought up in some form of nobility, the table was left in a relatively tidy state. With a little teamwork, the cleanup would take no time at all.

Arcus stared at the table in the abandoned dining room.

“You were an excellent host, Master Arcus.” Noah interrupted his reverie. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yeah, it was fun, especially ’cause it was my first time even experiencing a party.”

The only memories Arcus had of parties were fragmented and hazy, and came from before his sixth birthday. It had been fun chatting and eating around a table with everyone.

Cazzy returned to the dining room then. “Did ya have a fun time hostin’?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I did too badly either.”

“Good to hear. Here.” Cazzy showed him something. It was the small, decorated box in which Arcus kept his Silver Cross. Cazzy opened it and knelt down so Arcus could take a look inside. Arcus looked to both Noah and Cazzy for guidance.

Noah nodded. “That order belongs on your chest.”

“Yup,” Cazzy agreed. “It’d be a shame just to let it rot away in the box, right?”

Noah took the medal from the box and affixed it to Arcus’s clothing. The badge took the shape of a sparkling silver cross, suspended from a ribbon.

Arcus’s attendants smiled at him.

“I’m not a failure,” Arcus declared.

But there was still a long road ahead to prove it.

Joshua Raytheft had just finished subjugating a foreign race in the east, where he held his territory, when he heard the news. The war in Nadar was in its final stages. The Hans, a tribe hostile to Lainur, had invaded its eastern territory,

plundering and running rampant through its villages.

The eastern lords immediately sent in a subjugation force created from their private armies and conscripted soldiers, but the Hans' elusive fighting patterns did not allow for as easy a victory as was expected. On the contrary, the subjugation force was suffering losses.

At an impasse, the nobles requested reinforcements from House Cremelia, the military house that oversaw the region's nobles. Joshua led the charge of five hundred men under orders from Purce, and succeeded in driving back the Hans.

A few days after the conflict, when all the cleanup was finished, Joshua headed home for the capital. Three viscounts had been charged with assisting in the fighting, one of which was Raven Meyer.

"Congratulations, Lord Joshua, on an impressive feat."

A small part of those words was mere flattery. Meyer rubbed his hands together like a deceitful merchant, and came closer.

Joshua frowned at the strange smile glued on the fellow viscount's face. "Raven. I cannot fathom what I have done to warrant such congratulations."

This was far from the first time Joshua had driven back the Hans. Among their ranks, he was both hated and feared as the "Silver Flame." Another victory in a tiny scuffle was nothing to be congratulated over.

Meyer's sycophantic grin didn't break. "An amusing joke, My Lord. I am speaking of your House's achievements on the battlefield. There is no need for modesty."

"My 'House'? Achievement? I still have no idea what you are talking about. Would you care to enlighten me?"

"You are...being serious?" Meyer asked.

Joshua nodded.

Meyer's smile faded to be replaced with confusion. "I heard that your son has received an order from His Majesty."

"What? Where on earth did you hear that?"

“I am ill-informed of the details myself, but the story goes that he took part in the subjugation of Porque Nadar, and felled many an enemy soldier.”

Joshua paused. “Surely there must be some mistake? The talentless boy could not earn an order, much less kill somebody.”

Naturally, Joshua stubbornly refused to believe it, to the extent that he began to suspect Meyer might have been deceived. Joshua frowned in suspicion, which only led Meyer to back up his claim.

“Count Cremelia knows of this; I’ve heard His Lordship was present at the ceremony.”

Joshua was so perplexed that he failed to form a response. He was no longer certain in his doubt; not if the information was guaranteed by Purce Cremelia.

The joy returned to Meyer’s face; he had misinterpreted Joshua’s reaction. “You really had me fooled, Lord Joshua. To think your son wasn’t *really* talentless, or even disinherited! A successful campaign and an award for a mere boy of twelve! Not to mention, both His Majesty *and* His Royal Highness are said to be fond of him. Only a Raytheft, a name with a distinguished history, could have pulled it off!”

“I-Indeed...” Joshua’s reply lacked enthusiasm.

There must have been a mistake. That boy was incapable of earning an order. Perhaps he was being mixed up with somebody else—that was the only possible explanation. Those thoughts appeared and vanished from Joshua’s mind, much like the musings of a man attempting to reassure himself. Naturally, the rest of Meyer’s persistent flattery was fated to go in one ear and out the other.

It had been two weeks since Joshua learned of Arcus’s order from Viscount Meyer. Today, the boy’s father was in the capital visiting Purce Cremelia’s estate to report on the details of his subjugation of the Han Tribe.

A butler was showing him to Purce’s office when a young man with light brown hair came walking down the corridor in the opposite direction. He was slender and shorter than Joshua, with the stereotypical look of a public official.

And yet, the military might which lay within him made him seem much larger than he was. He walked with refined movements and flawless form, as though his torso was trained to perfection. The majestic air around him was befitting of any martial family.

Perhaps it was his position as successor to the founding family of the kingdom's national style of rapier fencing that made him healthier than others his age; he was Ian Cremelia, Purce's eldest son and one of Charlotte's elder brothers.

Joshua gave Ian a quick bow, which Ian responded to with an amicable smile. A gentle tenor sounded from between his thin lips.

"Good day, Viscount Raytheft."

"Lord Ian. It is a pleasure to see you again. The hottest season of the year shall soon be upon us; I hope you are faring well."

"I am quite well, thank you. I rest easy at night thanks to your efforts. Please allow me to express my gratitude. You did wonderful work repelling the Hans."

"I am much obliged, My Lord." Joshua bowed his head.

His earnestly humble mannerisms stemmed from the fact that Ian was to become the next head of the Cremelia House. In fact, he had acted this way towards Ian since he was a child for that very reason. Ian, meanwhile, addressed Joshua as a superior.

"I suspect it was a rather unsatisfying conflict for you."

"Yes, My Lord. The Hans are an unruly mob devoid of discipline. They are not worth fearing for an army possessing a chain of command. Though I could not say the same had any of the Five Generals shown up."

"Yes... Troll, Crossroads, Bird's Eye, Famine, and Sightless," Ian said.

Under the leadership of any of these legendary five, even a people as barbaric and wicked as the Hans could put up a fight against a first-rate military.

"They have been oddly quiet as of late," Joshua remarked.

"You know how the adage goes. *When your enemy is quiet, they can only be up to no good.*"

“Indeed. I urge you to be careful when you come to be involved in such subjugations, Lord Ian.”

“I shall remember that.” Ian nodded, gave a final parting word, and left, leaving Joshua on his way to Purce’s office again.

When he entered the room, he found Purce sitting behind the desk. He was scanning a document, no doubt related to military affairs.

Joshua stepped forwards and dipped his head. “My Lord, I am here to report on my recent subjugation of the Hans.”

“Speak.”

“Yes, My Lord. Under Your Lordship’s orders and my leadership, my arcane infantry repelled the enemy groups invading the territory.”

“Well done. Although I suppose such a simple feat requires no praise.”

“Indeed, My Lord. We felt barely any resistance at all.”

“Can we assume that the Hans attacked without any sort of plan then?”

“We did not detect any unusual movements, My Lord. It was likely a portion of the Hans venting dissatisfaction with their people, as usual.”

“How tiresome. Why do they not confine such things to their own territories?”

“A pertinent question. Eventually we shall have no choice but to eliminate those savages.”

Joshua’s declaration may have sounded extreme, but it was an opinion shared by all the eastern houses, including House Cremelia—such was the distaste Lainur’s people held for the Hans. They came down from the mountains in a storm of murder, pillage, and rape, all to fuel their unsavory brand of sorcery and ritual. It wasn’t something the kingdom could just sit by and watch. Any villages they attacked were left in nightmarish conditions, torn to shreds as if by a band of demons. Since being placed at the top of the eastern houses, it was Count Cremelia’s ambition to eliminate the Hans completely, but so far he had found no success.

“And what of the barony?”

“Three settlements have suffered heavy damage.”

“I see. Tell the baron to take his time and allow his territory to heal. Thank you for your service.”

“My Lord, I shall follow your orders to my final breath.” Joshua dipped his head. Though he had finished giving his report, he made no move to leave. What he wanted to discuss next he felt much more important. “If I may, there is a matter I wish to inquire about, My Lord.”

“What may that be?”

Joshua’s features twisted uncomfortably. “Well, My Lord... Before returning from the east, Viscount Raven informed me that Arcus received an order from His Majesty. He told me that Your Lordship is also privy to the situation, hence why I thought fit to ask. Is it true?”

“You mean to say you didn’t know? It is my understanding that Arcus’s achievements in the subjugation of Nadar warranted a reward.”

Purce knew what Joshua was referring to, but didn’t answer the question directly. Joshua gave a small nod before taking another step forwards.

“My Lord, the boy is talentless. For him to receive an order—there must be some mistake somewhere.”

“I can assure you it is true. He was called to the ceremony, and presented with his reward there.”

“That cannot be! That boy is useless; he has very little aether. Receiving an order should be utterly impossible for him!”

As Joshua’s temper flared, Purce’s gaze turned sharp. “Joshua. Orders are conferred according to His Majesty’s judgment. It is improper for a noble of the kingdom to voice an objection. Surely you know that?”

“Y-Yes, My Lord, and I meant no criticism of the royal family in my previous statement, of course...” Joshua replied, immediately softening his tone. Objecting to Shinlu’s judgment was the same as objecting to the king himself.

“My understanding is based only on what I have heard, but it would appear that Arcus’s achievements in the west were undoubtedly worthy of an order.

He was the first to uncover Porque Nadar's disloyalty, saved His Royal Highness from danger, and then stayed by his side as per his request as they went to war. On the battlefield itself, he destroyed the Empire's magical troops and slayed Nadar's leading attendant. His Majesty recognized Arcus's achievements, and awarded him the Order of the Silver Cross third class."

"The S-Silver Cross?"

"That's right."

"But My Lord! Simply slaying a leading attendant should hardly equate to the Silver Cross!"

In Lainur, decorations and peerages were generally reserved for outstanding achievements. Defeating significant enemies on the battlefield would usually earn you a monetary reward and a letter of commendation, but nothing more. On that basis, it made no sense that Arcus would receive a medal for simply slaying a hostile officer.

"That is not the full extent of Arcus's achievements. In reality, he has done enough to warrant the Order of the Golden Cross; the details behind the rest of his work have been held back for political reasons."

"I-Impossible... Are you speaking the truth?"

"I am indeed."

The news came as a considerable blow to Joshua. He had never doubted the boy's lack of potential even once. To Joshua, he was nothing but a failure, with a level of aether that fell far below what was expected for a magical martial house. That he had found success on the *battlefield* of all places was the last news he had expected to hear.

Purce pressed on, not allowing Joshua the time to get over his shock. "How much longer do you plan on turning a blind eye, Joshua?"

"A-A blind eye to what, My Lord?"

"To Arcus, of course."

Joshua paused. "If I may, My Lord, I have no recollection of ever 'turning a blind eye.' Since the very day I learned of the boy's lack of talent, he has done

nothing to warrant my attention at all,” he declared callously.

Purce let out a small sigh. “A child of such abundant ability and intelligence is a rarity, even among the noble houses. It is absurd that you should claim him to lack talent.”

“My Lord, the boy has no ‘ability’! He lacks even the basic ability required to use magic: aether! I understand this may be difficult for a non-magician such as Your Lordship to comprehend, but a magician’s worth depends solely on their aether stores.”

“Joshua. Where does this obsession with aether come from? Your own brother had less aether than you do, and he became a state magician. His aether, or lack thereof, had nothing to do with it, surely?”

“My brother is an outlier. That is not to say that he does not deserve the position. I know he put in a steady effort to get where he is.” Joshua paused and shook his head. “But we are speaking of two entirely separate things. The boy does not possess nearly enough aether to qualify as a magician of nobility.”

“And yet he did enough to earn a Cross.”

“A mere coincidence. One day, the boy’s path will inevitably be blocked by those who possess magnificent ability or extraordinary amounts of aether.” A sinister light shone in Joshua’s crimson eyes. “My Lord, do you know the extent of my feeling when I first encountered this kingdom’s state magicians? I was struck with the absolute power difference between us, the certainty that I would never best them. There is a vivid sense of inferiority when faced with an opponent one shall never beat.”

“I cannot fault the logic behind your words, but I must question whether such a power balance *could* be broken, if only one would put in the effort. While there is an undeniable variation in people’s natal talents, could those gaps not be compensated for by different techniques or knowledge?”

“That is a common talking point of those with talent, My Lord. Cruel as it may be, those with a natural aptitude for magic have a great influence on those without. The only way those without that aptitude can compete is with their aether stores. As long as one has plenty of aether, there is always the possibility of them performing great feats with magic.”

“It pains me that in passing such a view on to your son, you risked stealing away his future.”

“No, My Lord, no. There was no future to steal. There is no hope, nor potential to be found in magicians who lack aether. Should that boy step into the public eye, it will be no time at all until he is crushed by those who hold the aether he does not.” Joshua paused. “I would not be surprised if he attempts to join the Institute. That is when he shall learn everything I am relaying to Your Lordship now. Much as I did.”

“Joshua...” Purce could think of nothing more to say as Joshua’s painful emotions came to the fore.

Joshua was by no means an average magician. Both as a magician and a military officer, as the man who was tasked with carrying on the Raytheft tradition, he displayed incredible wit. That he was able to drive back the Hans, who often appeared unexpectedly and without clear strategy, time and time again was proof of that. Purce trusted his abilities as a general were greater than those assigned their posts out of the blue following the conquest of an enemy. It was exactly why Purce chose to keep him close at hand, and put so much faith in him. It was also why Purce tried to bring Joshua around but, as perhaps he should have expected, the viscount was unwilling to listen.

“Noble magicians who lack aether deserve to taste defeat. That is the only way. The only way...” Joshua muttered to himself incessantly, until his heightened state subsided.

After Joshua departed Purce’s office, Ian stepped into the room.

“What on earth were you discussing with the viscount, father? I heard him shouting much more than a simple report should warrant. Is there trouble among the eastern houses?”

“No, nothing has changed in the east. As usual, there is no greater trouble there than the Hans’ usual business.”

“So why, father?”

“You know of Arcus Raytheft, do you not?”

Ian clapped his hands together as the pieces fell into place. “Oh, yes, him. I heard he found great success in the western war.”

“Indeed.”

Ian knew not only of Arcus, but the circumstances—including the details of his family—in which he was born. He knew him primarily as the boy who was deemed talentless and disinherited for his lack of aether, and the news that he had performed so well in the war came as a surprise to Ian.

“I see. So the viscount is disturbed.”

“I understand it would be difficult to accept from the son he disinherited, but even then his stubbornness pushes the boundaries.”

“I, too, find it difficult to comprehend. There are still plenty of options for one’s future when one lacks aether. Why the viscount regards it as an insurmountable hill is beyond me.”

Purce knitted his brow as he thought back to Joshua’s stubborn outburst.

Sensing the solemn mood in the air, Ian changed track. “Oh yes, father. Isn’t Arcus Raytheft due to visit our main training hall in the near future?”

“Indeed he is. Charley mentioned wanting an assault with him.”

Ian chuckled. “Meaning she would like to see the look of defeat on his face, no doubt.”

Purce smiled awkwardly. “No, I believe she is looking forward to a serious match. Apparently, she and Arcus were of an equal skill level when she was captured by Marquess Gaston.”

“I have been interested in meeting Arcus too. Are you curious about his skills, father?”

“Yes—I have only heard of them secondhand. And if Arcus is to become an attendant to His Royal Highness as I suspect, it will be imperative for me to know the extent of his skill.”

“An attendant to His Royal Highness?”

“It appears to be what His Royal Highness wishes, so there is little doubt in my

mind that it shall be so.”

Ian’s surprise was understandable. A disinherited child was on the same level as a commoner, and no prince had ever wished for a commoner to serve him—nor did Ian think it would ever have crossed a royal’s mind.

“Arcus was intelligent enough to detect Nadar’s plot before anybody else. He fought on the battlefield without concern for his own life. And His Royal Highness trusts Arcus more deeply than you might imagine.”

“As I recall, they are similar in age too. I wonder if that has anything to do with it?”

“Perhaps, but believe me when I say Arcus is doubtlessly talented.”

“In that case, I am even more eager to see him at our training hall.”

“As am I. I would like to see how he wields his sword.”

“Now I think of it, was Charley not engaged to him?” Ian asked. “Is it still your intention that they marry?”

“I would like it if they could, but I will likely have to ask for His Majesty’s judgment on the matter.”

“...Does His Majesty’s judgment matter when it comes to a disinherited boy?”

“It does, and you shall eventually learn why. Arcus has done great work as a magician, even before he earned his order.”

“Really?” Surprise colored Ian’s face again.

Purce stood up and turned to the window. Outside he could see Joshua walking to his carriage.



There was no doubt that Arcus was talented, but Purce knew Joshua would still refuse to accept it going forward. It was his expectation that his son would be crushed by those who possessed much more aether, and there was one reason Purce could think of as to why that might be:

Joshua had suffered that fate. Hence, Arcus should suffer the same.

Joshua had the copious aether that Arcus did not. To recognize that Arcus was successful despite this required Joshua to recognize his own lack of talent.

“Joshua. Just because he lacks aether does not mean he lacks the ability to hold his head high.”

Arcus may have been disinherited and treated poorly, but he never let that discourage him. He didn't despair over his lack of aether, instead using it as an impetus to ask Craib for his instruction, and devote himself to mastering magic. Arcus already possessed a strong, ambitious drive when Purce first met him. He retained that drive when he presented his aethometer to the Magician's Guild. He was always looking forward, always determined to keep making progress.

Arcus was the type of person to aim for bigger and better, moving forward under his own will without allowing failure to set him back.

Purce was confident that Arcus would find a solution. That confidence did not come from within *him*, but from something innate within Arcus.

Part 3: Charlotte's Sword

Arcus found himself within a nostalgic dream, one which retold an event not of his own life, but of that man's. It was an experience the man had while practicing iaido.

It took place in a training hall of a private, metropolitan sports center. This hall was open several times a week, holding nighttime classes with an instructor for local members and students. It was not just experienced students who showed up either. There were children who had never studied iaido before, people who used the art to enhance their kendo, those who simply wanted to cultivate their mind, and so forth.

The man had started training in iaido from around Arcus's current age, both for learning purposes, and to improve his mental fortitude. He could remember well a peculiar old man who would show up now and then to the sessions. His hair and beard were streaked with white, making them look ashen. He was more agile than you would expect from a man of his age, and his eyes came to a sharp point. From his perfected physique and the air of danger around him, it was clear that he had trained with the sword for a long time.

This older man wasn't a member, nor was he an instructor, and yet when he attended, the senior instructors treated him with all the respect due to a revered superior. The man from Arcus's long dream assumed he held a high rank, either in iaido or kendo, but despite his skill, that wasn't the case at all. He was a mysterious elder indeed.

And so the man from Arcus's dream guessed the gentleman was a practitioner of an ancient martial art revived in the postwar period, or perhaps a member of a newfound fencing school, but upon questioning, the instructors denied this too.

What *was* clear was that this older man was not well-versed in the art of kendo. Kendo was rooted in the ideology of Zen, but it was obvious in the way he approached his sword that he wasn't influenced by such teachings.

When the older man attended the training sessions, he seemed to shine brighter than the light of a drawn sword. This was an art about maintaining inner peace, about the perfect pursuit of harmony within one's sheath. But when this man trained, there was always a glimpse of a fearsome beast within his actions. Perhaps that was why the instructors warned that this elder was to be respected, but that his words were not to be heeded.

During one of those training sessions, the man from Arcus's dream spoke to the elder.

"You wish to know about the mind's eye?" the elder had said.

"That's right. I've been curious about it for a while now. I thought you might know something, Fuwa-san."

"Well, it's just like that phenomenon you see in manga, isn't it? That thing where the character can see their opponent even with their eyes closed."

"I can't believe that is possible. You can't see anything with your eyes closed, so how are you supposed to detect your opponent's movements? It defies logic."

"Yes, obviously you would have to be some sort of superhuman to be able to actually do it."

"That's what I thought—and that's why I want to know what the mind's eye *really* is. Can you give me any insight?"

"Well, if we are talking about swordsmanship, then I would say it is the ability to predict your opponent's next move, based on what they are currently doing. To any onlookers, it would seem then that you are seeing right through your opponent. I suppose that is generally what is referred to by seeing with your mind's eye."

"Does that mean there is a less general definition too?"

"Yes, well, while that first definition still stands, when we speak of the mind's eye, we are talking about deducing our opponent's current mental state from their movements."

"Their mental state?"

“That’s right. You can detect the flux and distortions in their mental state from more than just their gross physical movements. It can be seen in their expression, their perspiration, their breathing, their eye movements...everything. It allows you to infer what they are thinking in the present moment. Naturally, that allows you to know what they will do next.”

“This is starting to sound very psychologically technical.”

“Perhaps it is, but that only goes to show how vital it can be to read your opponent’s mind in battle. All of this aside, there is one thing that I *know* to be true.”

“What’s that?”

“The purpose of your mind’s eye is not to look at what your regular eyes can already see. Its true purpose is to seek out that which can *not* be seen by ordinary means.”

The man looked at his elder, confused.

“That could mean many things: your opponent’s psychological condition, as I have just explained; the timing of certain moves that have not yet been performed; perhaps even radio waves. Those who make use of their mind’s eye are able to sense things like that which are otherwise invisible.”

“Meaning the people who are capable of this skill are able to draw out information the rest of us can’t.”

“Correct. In order to defeat them, you require an equivalent quality. Something that will allow you to identify the same information, information unavailable to them, or simply *more* of it.”

“So this has all come back around to being about winning or losing...”

“I’m sure you knew that when you asked. Doesn’t it always with me?”

“I suppose so. Shimayama-san doesn’t know that I talk to you, does he?”

“I’m afraid the ship has sailed on that one. He’s watching us right now. I’m sure he’ll scold you just as hard as he did for your reverse draw the other day.”

The younger man laughed. “Crap, that’s the last thing I need.”

“Your curiosity is an ailment. Though it explains why you are so skilled for your age.”

“I never *feel* as though I’m improving.”

“I’m not surprised; such is the nature of iaido. If you want tangible improvement, then kendo is the art for you. Getting knocked about by those who hold the same goal as you day after day will make you stronger whether you like it or not. And if you become a decent instructor, you can earn tons of money. Yes, kendo is the art for those who seek strength.”

“Could you teach me something then—I think it was a move you did the other day. When you threw the opponent and took his sword. It was awesome, like something right out of a movie.”

“I’ve told you time and time again: that has nothing to do with kendo. If that’s the sort of thing you’re after, you’re better off reading manga or going to the movies. Now, are you sure you should still be talking to me?”

“I’m getting yelled at either way, so I might as well keep going.”

Laughter echoed through the hall, but it was not clear whose it was.

The memory of that scene came to Arcus through his dream. Whenever the man and the elder’s paths crossed during training, he would grill him for knowledge beyond the scope of their classes—techniques that would not be found in ordinary kendo or iaido, some of which could even be called sinister. Yet they required a wholehearted devotion to the sword, one which toed the boundary of insanity.

Though the same was true of the man to some extent, Arcus had the impression that the elder was much more than he appeared. He had learned everything there was to learn about the sword, and all there was left for him in training was to practice a downward slice, over and over. If his answers on the mind’s eye were vague, then it must have been an imprecise concept indeed. The man himself was never able to work out the true nature of the mind’s eye either.

“There’s just not enough information to make reliable use of it. It lets you see stuff you can’t otherwise see? Does that mean it’s beyond the five senses?”

Arcus mumbled to himself, as he pulled himself out of bed. His hair was sticking up all over the place, and his eyes were only half-open.

Unfortunately, *he* didn't possess any weird telepathic powers that the man might have. There *were* superhumans like Arcus's uncle, who had similar abilities of perception, but that wasn't a skill Arcus could just magic up with wishful thinking.

Apart from anything else, the man had been much, *much* more skilled with the sword than Arcus at this point. Arcus had more physical ability and fighting experience, but there were still several moves from the man's arsenal that Arcus wasn't capable of emulating, regardless of the fact that he should have more potential too.

The man never pulled off kan'are, but then I can't pull off the same swings and footwork as him for some reason...

Arcus could remember the man's movements with perfect clarity. His experience of living that man's life through his eyes was a unique one, and ingrained the muscle memory into his body. But whether or not he could actually recreate those moves was another matter, and Arcus knew well that technique required more than physical competency. If he had access to a sword, he would be able to get in some proper practice, but the fact was that he didn't.

"Maybe I should make myself something that *feels* like a sword."

Reproducing the weapon itself was a tall order. If Arcus was after good quality iron, all he needed to do was produce some steel from iron sand, but there was more to making a sword than just that. A master craftsman was needed for that, which Arcus was not. A tough, solid blade required the combination of several types of iron, and to make its curve, it needed to be cooled rapidly to create variance in its tension. It wasn't a process that could be fully understood just by watching a video or reading about it in a book.

Realistically, he was only capable of making a bamboo sword, or a crude metal facsimile. Essentially, he was just making a replica of a replica, but at the very least it would allow him more fruitful practice. If only they'd had katanas, or something similar, in this world...

“Master Arcus,” Noah’s voice called from outside his door. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah! I just woke up this second!”

“I suggest you start getting ready, else you might miss your appointment.”

“Oh yeah! That’s today.”

Arcus suddenly remembered he was due at the Cremelias’ training hall today. His party, when Charlotte had invited him to visit, wasn’t all that long ago. They’d remained in contact afterward to arrange it, and settled on today as the chosen date.

Arcus changed, washed, and ate, and then he was at the door.

“How is your arm, Master Arcus?”

“It’ll probably be fine for fencing. But I’m bringing this too.” Arcus shook the oblong bag at his side demonstratively. Inside was a wooden rapier and a wooden sword.

“Do try not to push yourself. Your arm has not healed completely.”

“I know. Thanks.”

Arcus waved goodbye to his concerned attendant, and then left his estate behind. Making his way down the city’s main street, he eventually made it to the boundary of the noble neighborhood. When he arrived at the training hall grounds, he was greeted by a familiar face: Charlotte. Knowing roughly what time he was due, she had been waiting for him at the gate.

She was dressed in lightly padded athletic attire, without a single piece of flair or accessory. Her long, golden-brown hair was tied up behind her head so it would stay out of her face. On the night of the party, Arcus had compared her to the sheltered maiden, Jacqueline, but now she gave a completely different impression.

Charlotte looked perfectly composed too, as though the wait had not bored her one bit. She smiled warmly at Arcus as he approached. “Welcome, Arcus.”

“Thank you, My L—Charlotte.”

Charlotte averted her gaze awkwardly when he corrected himself. The pink

tinge to her cheeks revealed that the alcohol had not affected her memory. “P- Please don’t put too much stock into what I said. In fact, I’d be grateful if you were to forget all about it.”

Charlotte must have come to the conclusion that her actions were a mistake.

“So I should address you formally again?”

“Not that. Please speak casually when we are alone together.”

“Got it.”

Once that was settled, the two made a little small talk before Charlotte led Arcus into the grounds. They were much larger than Arcus had thought, and there were several buildings which looked like training halls. These were the main halls for studying rapier fencing in the capital: the number one spot of choice for any citizen wishing to train in the city. The students weren’t limited to nobles and their children; there were many commoners too—mostly soldiers, or the children of influential merchants. The training halls were separated between the classes to avoid any unnecessary trouble.

Arcus and Charlotte arrived at the hall where noble scions were permitted to train. There were already several students clad in defensive equipment and engaged in bouts atop the wooden floor. Since rapiers were used in actual combat, Arcus expected training in the sport to be violent, but the scene before him betrayed his expectations. Perhaps it was the influence of the nobles using the hall that prevented things from becoming too extreme. Aside from the use of wooden rapiers, lightness of the defensive clothing, and the movements, it somewhat resembled the training of modern fencing.

Arcus also noticed that a lot of the trainees were younger than he expected. He asked Charlotte why; apparently, the adults were generally too busy with work to train at times other than the evenings or days off.

Since thrusting was the most important move in rapier fencing, the combatants’ rapier tips had been buffered with rolled-up cloth. They were also aiming for the torso more than anywhere else, where injury was less of a risk.

Some of the nearby students stopped and greeted Charlotte, a member of the founding family, when she and Arcus entered. It was then that Arcus felt the

peculiar tingle—a sharp prickling—of somebody staring at him, and it was difficult to tell where or who it came from immediately. But then Arcus realized that it seemed to be coming from everyone around them.

Perhaps it was the taut atmosphere in the hall that made Arcus sensitive to what were probably just curious stares. Why else would anybody be looking at him?

Arcus swept his gaze around the hall, which brought another doubt to mind. He voiced it to Charlotte, being sure to keep his phrasing formal in the presence of others.

“There don’t appear to be any instructors.”

The students were engaged in bouts of various formations, but Arcus saw no hint of supervision.

“At this time of day, they are either on break or engaged in meetings,” Charlotte replied, leading Arcus through the students to one corner of the hall. Making sure they had room to practice, she pulled out a wooden rapier. “Are you not going to wear a jacket or anything?”

“Oh, um. It’s okay. I haven’t ever worn any protective gear in practice before.”

“No?”

“My uncle prefers to keep me on my toes.”

Craib was spartan like that. It was his belief that learning required pain, and so Arcus never wore any protective gear when they practiced. Instead, he used magic to heal himself when he was injured. It was thanks to that tough training that Arcus was skilled in judging distance, dodging, and parrying: techniques which had served him well in the fight against Dyssea.

“My left arm is not completely healed, so my movements may be a little clumsy. I hope you won’t mind.”

“Of course not. This is just a casual bout, after all. It’s important you make small efforts like this too, else you may find it more difficult to come back to the sport when you are all healed up.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

The human body only got stiffer the less it was used, and the same held true for one's reflexes. Training in a hall like this would be a worthwhile experience too. Charlotte knew when she invited Arcus that he wasn't in tip-top physical condition, so he never expected her to want an all-out contest.

The kingdom's style of rapier fencing required holding your weapon in one hand. The left arm was only used to keep the body balanced, meaning Arcus could safely participate even when it was mostly out of commission. He doubted Charlotte would have requested a bout otherwise.

They would start off at a leisurely pace—but just as Charlotte and Arcus faced each other, ready to begin, they were interrupted by hurried footsteps. It was one of the hall's students.

"Lady Charlotte, Lord Ian is calling for you."

"Oh?"

"He asked Your Ladyship to please come quickly."

"I wonder what the matter could be. He did say he would be along later, but we've barely started..." Charlotte gazed at the student in confusion, and the student averted his own gaze awkwardly. There was only one way for her to find out what was wrong. "Forgive me, Arcus, I must go. Would you mind waiting for me?"

"Of course not, My Lady." Arcus lowered his head.

Charlotte put her defensive equipment and rapier to one side before hurrying out of the hall.

It happened the second she was gone.

A group of students stopped what they were doing and approached Arcus all at once. The sense that he was being watched had intensified, and now he knew it wasn't down to his imagination. The students, all clad in defensive gear, had him surrounded before he knew it.

"What's all this about?" Arcus asked, looking from one face to the next.

It was a young man who answered.

"We heard that you were Lady Charlotte's ex-fiancé. And that you were

disinherited.”

Arcus paused. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“And you have the gall to set foot in this training hall? You’ve never even trained here.”

“Lady Charlotte invited me herself.”

“So what?”

“Huh?”

Apparently Arcus’s reasoning wasn’t good enough. These students had no intention of being won over with words, nor would they have surrounded Arcus in such an intimidating manner if all they wanted was to complain about his presence.

“We’re going to test you. To see if you are worthy of our training hall.”

“Test me?”

Were they really planning to pick a fight with a guest of the count’s daughter? The summons from Charlotte’s brother must have been their doing too.

Arcus knew of some schools where cocky newcomers endured rigorous training to teach them a lesson, but this situation was different. He was younger than these students, *and* he was here by special invitation. Personally, he didn’t approve of such a welcome, but perhaps it was *because* they saw Charlotte bring him here, or their pride as students of this school, which led them to act this way. It was clear now that the sharpness he felt was from their bloodthirsty gazes.

Arcus was having a hard time figuring out how he’d gotten into this situation. There was always the option to flee, but on the other hand, this might make for a golden opportunity to test his ability with the sword. It would allow him to compare his skills against those formally trained by the state, and Arcus was curious to know where he stood.

Arcus put his wooden rapier back into his bag and pulled out his oaken training sword in its place. He’d commissioned a carpenter for it a while back; his foresight had paid off. He’d brought it here to compete with Charlotte; he

never thought its first battle would be something like *this*. If there was one thing that made him nervous about using this sword, it was the condition of his left arm. He couldn't muster any power behind the limb; at best he could use it for balance. In rapier fencing, locking swords was, if not assured, then certainly very likely. He would just have to be careful not to let it come to that.

Arcus prepared his sword and verbally accepted the challenge while his mind busied itself worrying over his limits.

"I don't trust him. He was disinherited. What is he doing associating with Her Ladyship now?"

"Had he enrolled as a student, that would be one thing, but he's a mere 'guest.'"

"He should have declined the invitation! It's just common sense."

"I heard he's talentless. He has no business being anywhere near Her Ladyship."

"Clearly, he doesn't know what this place is. So we'll teach him."

The young students around Arcus denounced him one by one. They mostly seemed motivated by pride, but he could sense a hint of jealousy among them too. Clearly, the intention was to put him in his place. As Charlotte's former fiancé, it was also possible they were wary of him causing a scene by acting above his station. They needed to take him down a peg and make a show of their superior strength.

It appeared there was also a less pleasant, simpler aspect to it all: they just didn't like him.

No matter their motive, this was a training hall; as long as they got their story straight with the other students, they could probably claim it as a part of their practice. As for Arcus, once he'd won, he could just tell Charlotte they allowed him to train with them, that they were weaker than he'd expected, and apologize.

"Step forward. We're starting." The order came from the young man who first spoke down to Arcus—he must have been the leader among this age group.

Arcus's first opponent was a younger student—though still older and taller than himself. He wore the same training gear as the others, as well as padded gauntlets, a leather chest protector, and a guard on his right shoulder. He held a wooden rapier, with no buckler or smaller sword in his other hand.

Arcus looked around; the students around him appeared to have multiplied. More must have come over from separate buildings. There were some female students too, lingering outside the ring as spectators. He heard shrill cries of “how cute!” from them, presumably aimed at him. Truly, their words hurt more than the strike of a sword.

The leader must have had authority over them too, because one look from him silenced them.

Regardless, Arcus's focus right now needed to be on the opponent in front of him. Just standing before him was enough to pick up on his hostility and irritation. It was beyond unpleasant. No provocation, nor words of any kind were required. Arcus could feel the ill will through his rapier.

His opponent stepped forward with his right leg, thrusting his rapier towards Arcus in the traditional stance. Arcus was familiar with the movement; Craib and Noah had trained him in rapier fencing more thoroughly than any other sword art. He also had the man's experiences in training with the sword. All in all, he had everything he needed to put up a fight against these students. More than that, he was used to facing Noah, a fearsome swordsman by any standard. Compared to him, the trainees here should have been no match for Arcus, assuming they weren't on a similar level.

His opponent wore shoes, making the wooden floor creak in protest underfoot with each step. Meanwhile, Arcus faced him with his sword leveled at his eyes. There was always the option of holding his sword in one hand and leaning his torso over slightly to minimize his profile, but Arcus was more used to his current basic stance.

The opponent's gaze was focused solely on Arcus's chest, as if the hatred welling up inside him had given him tunnel vision.

“Begin!” came the leader's shout.

His opponent jumped forwards at once, closing the gap between them and

thrusting with his rapier while letting out a *kiai*.

Arcus already knew the exact spot the tip of his rapier would end up; the attack missed.

Arcus lowered his left leg and twisted his torso around the blow. His opponent pulled back his blade, then dove back in for the next strike. This time Arcus retracted his right leg and shifted his torso in the same direction to avoid the attack, then slid to one side to deny his opponent the option to strike his back.

Swordsmanship was all about distance. Being able to accurately gauge the space between yourself and your opponent was vital.

It didn't matter how fast they were.

It didn't matter how big they were.

To land a strike, you had to close the gap. For that, you needed to know how much distance your sword needed to make contact. This could be worked out with an accurate understanding of the length of your opponent's weapon, arms, and legs.

Likewise, to avoid an attack, you simply needed to shift out of that space the moment before it hit, and your opponent's sword would not reach you. With a thrust, you let it get *this close* and no closer, then bat it aside. If it came from above, it could be parried. There were several choices.

Straight... Feint... Straight... Step forward... Step forward...

Arcus would not make a decisive strike yet; he would observe his opponent's fighting patterns. The student closed the gap between them gradually, thrusting again and again.

Huh?

For one split second, the opponent's thrust suddenly came much slower, as though he were making the move underwater. Suddenly, Arcus could make out every last detail of that movement, much like he had when fighting Dyssea and the Black Panther Cavalry. It was the same mysterious phenomenon—though everything around him appeared slower, Arcus's own movements retained their

normal speed. It was uncomfortable enough that Arcus instinctively stepped away from his opponent as soon as he got the chance.

“Wh—That was impossibly fast!” one of the students gasped.

“U-Um...”

Arcus was just as surprised, and unsure how to respond. All he’d done was jump back slightly—he hadn’t even used *kan’are*—and yet the students were gazing at him in wonderment.

“What are you doing?!” the leader snapped at Arcus’s young opponent.

“He won’t keep still!”

“Need I remind you which school you belong to? Stop messing around!”

“I-I’ll defeat him right away!” the student cowered back from the leader’s shout, increasing the nervous tension in his body.

It was a vicious cycle. The unpleasant emotions Arcus’s opponent held towards him were only piling up.

Meanwhile, Arcus focused his mind, feeling out for the strange sensation. He ignored the sounds around him and kept his gaze wandering freely. As soon as he focused all five senses in the direction of the fight, it happened again. His surroundings slowed, and his opponent was left to catch up with him.

Yes! I knew it!

Arcus looked down at his right fist, curled around his sword, and let out an internal triumphant shout. The knowledge that he would one day be able to control this phenomenon completely set his body atremble. This was a skill beyond his wildest dreams. It didn’t seem to be something he could make constant use of, nor something that would work against more powerful opponents, but it gave him extra time to move, even if he was late off the mark initially.

He was already more powerful than this opponent. Though his left hand was holding him back, this newfound power would be enough to make up for it.

Arcus put his right foot forward, his left back, and leveled his sword with his opponent’s eyes again. He aimed for his forehead and swung in time with the

student's thrust. The moment before the opposing rapier made contact, it struck against the side of Arcus's blade and was swept aside, allowing Arcus to land a hit against his opponent's forearm.

"Aah!"

The unexpected impact made the student drop his rapier. Genuine rapiers had a knuckle guard, so it was unlikely that students were taught to target the hand or forearm, but even then it should have been obvious to them what had just happened.

That was the first opponent down.

"Wait, *why*?!"

"You let him deflect you!"

"But I struck him..."

"You're supposed to look at his *sword*, you idiot!"

The student turned to glare at Arcus.

"If you've got time to glare at him, you've got time to practice your strikes!" the leader snapped. "Next!"

Arcus's next opponent was just as young as his first.

Parry... Riposte... Lunge... Flèche...

A thrust came flying right at Arcus, and he leaped aside. This opponent was much more aggressive than the first. He was keeping up the offensive to put Arcus under constant pressure.

As the match became more intense, the opponent shifted his dominant leg back and lowered his rapier without moving back from Arcus.

Leaf Thrust!

Leaf Thrust was a technique where the sword stabbed upward through the jaw and into the head. The angle made it a difficult move to parry.

Arcus stretched out his neck, throwing his head back, and took several steps backward to dodge it. This opponent really wasn't pulling his punches.

“Stop jumping about! What are you, a fly?!”

Arcus was silent.

“Say something!”

But still, Arcus was silent.

His opponent’s insults didn’t bother him. Arcus purposely averted his gaze, as if ignoring him, causing his face to turn bright red.

“Why you...! Stop making fun of me!”

The student jumped forward at once. Arcus guessed his intention was to catch his sword and hold back his movements. The opponent pushed his rapier in front of him, and raised it up overhead, with the grip in the air and the tip pointing down. He advanced further, holding it as if to defend himself. Should Arcus block as his opponent hoped, he would most likely be overpowered. If he tried to get away, it was possible his opponent would make use of his blade’s trajectory, and go for Arcus’s feet.

So Arcus advanced, leaving it till the last second to let his opponent figure out whether he was going to block or not; he didn’t, instead turning his sword around and stepping diagonally past his opponent’s left side. The feint allowed him to dodge his opponent’s blow, and then he would strike.

His opponent *had* been expecting Arcus to block, and now suddenly there was nothing for him to aim at. The moment Arcus was past, he positioned his sword at the nape of the opponent’s neck.

“Wh... Huh?” Confused, the student turned to the leader. “What just happened?”

“What do you mean ‘what just happened’? You’ve lost! That’s what happened!” the young man shouted.

“Ugh...” The student’s shoulders slumped.

A stir ran through the hall after Arcus’s second victory. What seemed to surprise them more than anything were the unfamiliar techniques Arcus was using.

“I didn’t know it was possible to switch between moves like that.”

“It was like his sword just...revolved, or something!”

It was an exaggerated interpretation, but Arcus could understand where it had come from. He was careful to grip his sword only as tightly as was necessary, allowing for more maneuverability. If his left arm had been in working order, he would have been able to pull off the move with even more agility.

“Next!”

The next opponent was a more cautious fighter who seemed in no rush to close the distance between them, possibly because he had seen how Arcus worked to open up the space again in his previous matches.

Arcus experimented, stepping back from his opponent, but still he didn't come any closer without due care.

And so, Arcus jumped backwards and rushed towards his opponent, juking and twisting like a lightning bolt's path.

His opponent reacted with confusion, unable to judge at first glance from which side he would be attacked.

Arcus changed course so he was running head-on, and then leaped—higher than his opponent's head. To his opponent, it would look like he'd disappeared into thin air. Arcus brought his sword down, striking his opposition's forehead the moment he was above him.

“Gah!”

Unable to react, the student ended up crouched on the floor.

Arcus could never have pulled off this move without the physical training he'd been through.

“Impossible...”

“What *was* that just now?”

A disturbed crease appeared in the leader's brow. “What are you doing?!” he cried. “You call yourself a swordsman?! You lost without even attempting a blow!”

“F-Forgive me!”

“Next!”

The next student was clumsy; seeing his classmates fall one after the other before him couldn't have done his confidence any favors. Any drive he may have had before this confrontation was nowhere to be seen.

Knowing this would be an easy match, Arcus aimed his sword's point at that of his opponent's, which was sticking too far forward. Once their swords made contact, he simply twisted his to deflect the other to one side.

“Huh? Ah!”

It wasn't enough to knock the opponent's rapier from his hand, but it was more than enough of an opening. Arcus stepped forwards, brought his sword away from his opponent's and hit it into his armpit.

The onlooking students seemed utterly amazed.

“That was incredible!”

“He's rather skilled.”

“I've never seen such sword work!”

The voices around him were slowly getting more positive. But Arcus was more keenly aware than ever that his technique still required a lot of work if he ever wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with Craib or Noah.

His most recent conflict had been with Dyssea and the Black Panther Cavalry, and the crushing intimidation inflicted on him by Bargue Gruba was still fresh in his mind. As long as the murderous intent he felt from them remained with him, he would always feel a need to improve.

But these students wouldn't even be a match for the mercenaries at Marquess Gaston's estate. It was likely that they'd yet to face any serious conflict. None of them were that much older than Arcus, save for the leader. He wouldn't be surprised if they were only just now growing accustomed to making use of the techniques they'd learned.

“Next! *Next!* Forward!” The leader's tone was becoming more curt.

Arcus's next opponent was only a little taller than him, but just as capable as the students who came before.

The two exchanged a few blows. The opponent brought his rapier downwards, while Arcus struck back with his own, his wooden blade hitting against the opponent's from underneath. Just like the student before him, the opponent's rapier was knocked to one side, allowing Arcus to strike his forehead.

"Geh!" The student fell back onto his rear, and the whispers in the hall became louder still.

"There wasn't much difference between their strikes—how did his come out stronger?"

"Most people would have retreated from an attack like that!"

"His sword must be imbued with some sort of magic. There's no other explanation."

There was, in fact, a simple explanation. His opponent hadn't expected Arcus to beat his blow. Arcus could have had his sword pointing straight forward, and the center of their blades would still have overlapped, allowing him to deflect his opponent's weapon with the thicker part of his own.

To the onlookers, it would have seemed like the opponent's sword suddenly swerved off to the side after meeting Arcus's in a swift strike that should have been effective. Without knowledge of Arcus's technique and the reasoning behind it, an amateur would be unable to discern what had happened—hence the comment about magic.

"You're useless! The whole lot of you! / shall go!"

Arcus had already defeated all those who had spoken against him, and now only their leader was left. His body was taut, and not excessively muscular, and his gaze was sharp; Arcus couldn't see even a hint of contempt or other superfluous emotions there.

It was obvious just standing opposite him: this man was on an entirely different level compared to Arcus's previous opponents—only fitting for the ringleader of this gang of trainees.

His stance was perfect, something that could not have come about without constant training. His gravity was flawlessly centered, and each limb was held with just the right amount of tension; his posture itself could be called a thing of beauty.

Arcus took up his own stance. He didn't let his eyes focus too much on one spot, instead sweeping them over his opponent's entire body. Then, he shifted his right foot forward and released some of the tension in his arms. There were several correct ways to hold one's sword depending on the sword itself and the desired move, but in this instance, Arcus formed a ring with his thumb, index, and middle fingers, a grip known as *tatsunokuchi*.

He extended his arm and tensed his torso to keep it from moving, in a stance which varied only a little from the traditional position of leveling your sword with the opponent's eyes. The tip of his sword was held slightly higher to compensate for the leader's superior height, just shy of being held overhead.

All of a sudden, the leader flinched. There was a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and Arcus picked up on a stiffness in his expression. It was a familiar reaction. Arcus had seen it in those intimidated by state magicians or other powerful opponents. Perhaps Arcus had picked up a similar air of majesty through his past conflicts.

Another student had taken on the role of referee in the leader's place. He gave the signal to begin.

"Hah!"

"Ayh!"

Their swords clashed once, then twice. That was all Arcus needed to recognize his opponent's skill. The leader's attacks were as elegant as his stance, and his strikes were beautifully straight. There was no buildup of negative emotion within him either. The other students Arcus had fought thus far had let their emotions rage, but this young man was perfectly calm. The man who had snapped and shouted at his classmates' defeats was nowhere to be seen, as though it had all been an act.

Of course, there was always the possibility that it *had* been an act. Arcus would need to look into that later, but right now his priority was the match.

That lack of negative emotion meant Arcus's opponent wouldn't make any unnecessary strikes or exaggerated movements for Arcus to exploit.

When Arcus moved forward to strike, his opponent moved back.

When Arcus deliberately slowed his swings, his opponent did not take the bait.

His opponent, too, tried to goad Arcus out with false strikes, but Arcus didn't let himself fall for it either.

For a while, the two of them did nothing but shuffle through their stances and shift their weight to the other foot and back. Arcus was eager to exchange blows again, but the two of them were out of sync. They both needed to give everything they had for that to happen. Reacting to a feint would mean defeat, so Arcus needed to be absolutely certain of his opponent's intentions before going in.

It would have been easy against an inferior opponent, but against somebody just as skilled—or more skilled—than Arcus, exchanging blows would be difficult even with his increased powers of focus. Arcus honed his focus to try and read his opponent's intentions.

Now this is an interesting match.

Arcus instinctively clamped his teeth together, holding back a gasp. That voice had sounded so much like his own, and yet it was not. While the match continued to appear stagnant, the voice whispered a selection of possible moves into his ear. Should Arcus listen to this voice, perhaps he could win—but it would no longer be his own victory.

It was toying with him. It was amusing itself with him. It was testing him.

But he knew he mustn't let it.

Arcus's technique was honest. Allowing darkness to take over his sword ran against his philosophy. If he hesitated now, he risked speaking these strange words aloud. He risked his heart being swayed by temptation.

"Hah!"

Casting off the mischievous whispers of his mind, Arcus put his left hand on

the back of his sword's wooden blade. Though he couldn't put any strength into that hand, it could still work as support. It was easier on it than allowing it to hold anything.

Arcus evaded his opponent's incoming attacks, until one threatened to strike him right on his head. He lifted his sword up high to block it and immediately turned it clockwise, deflecting his opponent's weapon to the right, before bringing his own sword down and striking.

"Nrk!" the young man grunted.

Arcus's sword had made contact, but barely. Not only was his opponent a master at maneuvering his rapier at close distances, he had skillfully twisted his body clear of the brunt of Arcus's attack; an impressive reaction.

Quite rightly, the referee hadn't counted the hit.

Arcus returned his left hand to its position at the back of his blade. That the speed of his movements was so limited frustrated him. He longed for the agility that came with the freedom to move—but for now he would have to put up with this sluggishness.

Arcus aimed the tip of his sword at his opponent. This time he held it like a billiards cue, or a spear. Should his opponent move in to strike, Arcus would hold it back with both hands in a firm block. But he wouldn't be able to do much more in that position with his left arm in its current condition.

That didn't mean it would be easy for his opponent to cut through this stalemate either. No matter the martial art, finding yourself faced with an opponent from a different school was a terrifying situation to be in. As long as you didn't know what moves the other side might make, caution was paramount—especially in this case, where this student had seen Arcus perform various moves with no apparent commonality between them.

Fending off a thrust to the left, Arcus stepped forward with his right leg, tilted his sword, and struck with the pommel.

"Gurgh!"

Arcus's counterattack hit his opponent in the chest, but as it hit against his chest protector, it didn't count—but it *did* do some damage. It was powerful

enough to knock the air from the leader's lungs, even through the protector, fracturing his focus for just a split second.

Arcus used the recoil from his strike to propel himself backwards, swiveling at the same time. He bent his knees to make himself compact, then spun once as though preparing for a spin kick, while sweeping his sword out sideways.

"Hah!"

The man reacted swiftly, lowering his body and stepping back at the same time to avoid the attack.

His opponent knew now what it meant when Arcus put his left hand to the back of his blade, so he instead emulated a golf swing and aimed at the shin of the leader's pivot leg.

The leader pulled his leg back and dodged the strike; the lack of crucial strength in Arcus's left arm slowed this type of move. He wished he could move with more vigor.

He leaped forward, attempting one upward diagonal slash after the other, only for his opponent to target Arcus's feet this time. He hurriedly leaped backwards and out of the way. The man charged at him again, and Arcus took to the offensive to meet him.

Holding his grip just above his head, Arcus let the tip of his sword fall behind him at an angle that was close to a hundred and eighty degrees. Then, he swung it around in a semicircle, using the grip of the sword as the axis. The move didn't require much action from his arms, instead relying on centrifugal force for its power as it came sweeping down.

Unable to block the attack quickly enough, the leader stumbled as he moved to intercept it. His wooden rapier slammed against Arcus's sword, and then Arcus began to hit again, striking one side of his opponent's rapier, then the other. Arcus kept his movements as small as possible, preventing the leader from going on the offensive, or even retracting his weapon at all.

After several hits, the leader's stance finally cracked.

"Guh!"

Arcus swept his sword at his opponent's torso...and made contact.

"...You win."

The leader didn't begrudge Arcus his victory. He withdrew his sword along with his will to fight—a gracious gesture, considering he was skilled enough to reverse the result within another round or two. Arcus was sure now that there was more to this man than his behavior revealed.

"What a cheat!" a voice cried out.

"A cheat," another agreed. "None of those moves were fair!"

"We would've won if he'd stuck to orthodox techniques!"

The complaints came from Arcus's previous, younger opponents. If only they were the only dissatisfied parties.

"I agree! This wasn't a fair competition!"

"He didn't use any rapier fencing techniques at all!"

"There is no way our students could have lost had he adhered to our fencing style!"

The spectating students added their voices to the furor.

Are these guys for real?

On a certain level, Arcus could sympathize—they *had* just seen several of their classmates suffer defeat at the hands of a random twelve-year-old. He doubted he would have believed it in their shoes, and he may even have felt just as enraged.

An air of danger was spreading through the hall, with more and more students raising their voices. In schools such as these, reputation was highly valued. If the rumor spread that a student from another school had run rampant through their training hall, that reputation would suffer. One way of avoiding that was to gang up on the outsider who had disturbed the peace, a common trope of period movies focusing on swordsmanship.

They really don't care that I'm Charlotte's guest, huh?

Their initial intention was to put him in his place. The fact that Arcus had

defeated them one by one had only added fuel to the fire, and now they seemed unable to think clearly anymore. The desire to cut him down was palpably more powerful than before. If Arcus did nothing, it was quite possible that they would attack.

While the situation was threatening to spiral out of control, Arcus still had several cards to play. Just because this was a training hall for rapier fencing didn't mean he was limited to using his sword. He was a magician: *magic* was his bread and butter.

He felt bad for Charlotte, but as long as he was under threat, he had no other choice but to find some escape. His left arm was still healing too, and for it to suffer any further damage would be disastrous. The bout he'd planned with Charlotte would have to wait for another day.

Arcus sent a silent apology to the students who weren't involved as he opened his mouth.

"Pop. Rage. A loud snore and the bugle at dawn. A clumsy cacophony of musicians amidst the shrill barking of dogs. A baby bawls as its father bellows. Come together noise, and release here as a cascade of..."

When he started to chant, the students froze. The same startled expression spread across their faces; whatever they had been expecting, it wasn't magic—but it served them right.

"W-Wait! Stop right there!" the defeated leader urged desperately.

It was already too late. Arcus was nearly finished with the incantation.

"That's enough!" a firm yet gentle voice commanded.

Arcus stopped at once, turning to look in the direction the order had come from. There at the hall's entrance stood a young man with golden-brown hair. Rather than anything athletic, he wore a fine suit, the kind that marked nobility. The decorations he wore weren't typical of a lower rank noble either.

The students stood up straight the moment they saw him, panic flashing through their eyes, and Arcus heard a few of them murmur, "Lord Ian!"

Ian—Ian Cremelia. The eldest son of the Cremelia House, and Charlotte's

biological brother.

Speaking of Charlotte, Arcus spotted her then, standing beside her brother and still wearing the same fencing gear as before.

It seemed the command to stop wasn't only directed at him; Ian stepped forward into the hall and cast his gaze over the students before him.

"Honestly. Have you no shame, ganging up on a boy younger than yourselves?"

"M-My Lord..."

"Yes? I trust you have a good reason?"

"The brat cheated."

"You did, did you?" Ian turned to look at Arcus.

"I do not believe I did."

Arcus's response elicited a deep sigh from Ian, who then narrowed his eyes at the students.

"And what do you plan to do once you step out on the battlefield and come across an opponent who uses techniques you are unfamiliar with? Complain that he is cheating? That shan't prevent your death at his hands, and I do not believe you have been trained so poorly."

The students fell into a dejected silence. Though Ian's words were mild, there was an indescribable authority behind them.

"I apologize for this farce you were forced to partake in."

"Not at all..." Arcus replied, a little dazed.

Charlotte dipped her head. "I'm really sorry about this, Arcus."

"Please do not apologize, My Lady. I actually rather enjoyed the experience."

"Thank you. That alone puts my mind at ease." Charlotte's features relaxed.

"What was that spell you attempted just now?" Ian asked.

"Ah... Out of fear of being attacked, it was my intention to render these students unconscious and make a getaway, My Lord."

Ian gave a thoughtful hum. “And you are capable of such a feat?”

“Arcus’s magical abilities have been recognized by His Royal Highness,” Charlotte explained. “I am sure he is capable of much more.”

“Yes, I did hear that you annihilated one of the Empire’s magical units in its entirety.” Ian turned to the students. “You ought to be grateful that you weren’t subject to the same fate.”

The students’ eyes widened.

Arcus lowered his head towards Ian. “Lord Ian, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Arcus Raytheft.”

“I know who you are. I am Ian Cremelia. It is an honor to meet you.” Ian offered Arcus his hand to shake. “I realize this comes quite late, but thank you for rescuing my sister. I am eternally grateful.”

“Not at all, My Lord. I was a little...wild back then.”

Arcus returned the handshake tentatively, while Ian smiled warmly at his response.

“Might I ask how long you had been watching for, My Lord?”

“I had been standing outside that window since around the time the fighting started,” Ian said, pointing at said window and not seeming the least bit ashamed.

Arcus had suspected as much; the timing with which Ian interrupted had been too perfect for it to be a coincidence.

Charlotte suddenly looked quite sullen. “You knew, brother? Why didn’t you stop them?”

“Huh?”

“I knew what they would do,” Ian explained. “Though I did nothing to actively encourage it, I have instilled such values within them.”

“And I did try to put an end to it...” came a third voice.

...but they didn’t listen, was the implication.

It had taken an order from the next head of the family to halt the students in

their tracks, and it was only now that Arcus realized it was the leader who had spoken, and that he was outside of the threatening circle.

“Wait, you were in on this too?”

“Noticed, did you? Lord Ian instructed me to hold them off only if things really took a turn for the worse. I never thought that they would start accusing you of cheating, though. And I have to admit, I panicked a little when you started with that incantation.” The young leader scratched at the back of his head awkwardly.

In other words, this man was the instigator. Presumably the philosophy was that gentle instruction was more effective than letting the students loose their anger on Arcus.

Ian gave the leader a stern look. “I need to be able to trust that these students respect your authority absolutely.”

“My apologies, My Lord. I didn’t expect students from the other halls to get involved.”

“But why do all of this in the first place?” Arcus asked, still unconvinced.

“His Lordship said he wanted to see how you would react.”

“I knew you would be able to manage, were the stories about you true. If not, I would have intervened as I just did. I believe it taught the students an important lesson too,” Ian said. “Though they won’t be spared a scolding, of course. From both of us.” He turned and unleashed a wave of his authoritative aura their way. His mild demeanor belied a fierce severity, necessary for one who would not only inherit this school of rapier fencing, but would come to unite all of the eastern families.

The leader turned their way too. “Just because someone does not train with our school does not make them unworthy of our respect! Don’t think you’re invincible just because you’ve made a little progress!” he shouted.

It was clear to Arcus that their next training sessions would be grueling. Though he sympathized, there was still a spark of satisfaction within him.

“You seem to think highly of my skills, My Lord,” Arcus said.

“I may be a man of the east, but I have heard of the Black Panther Cavalry’s devastating power. Seeing as your swordsmanship was enough to beat them, I didn’t think these young students should cause you any problems.” Ian smiled.

Behind that smile, Arcus sensed he was the type of man to take advantage of people. He knew when to step back too, and Arcus wasn’t sure he liked it. It seemed Charlotte was aware of this part of her brother’s personality, because she had been acting apologetic this whole time.

“I’m still not entirely certain this was a fair way to test my skills,” Arcus admitted.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Ian reassured him. “I gained permission from Crucible himself. In fact, he was rather keen on the whole idea.”

“*Uncle...*” Arcus growled. As usual, Craib’s training philosophy operated on the logic that the more ruthless the training, the better the student.

“It just goes to show how highly Crucible thinks of you. He probably saw this as a ‘light’ exercise more than anything else.”

Arcus had to agree. Usually, training sessions with Craib were much more violent than what he’d just experienced. These scuffles were almost blissful in comparison.

“I’m still unhappy,” Arcus admitted.

Ian laughed. “In that case, I hereby grant you permission to use our training halls freely from now on. You may practice your swordsmanship as often as you wish, whether you wish to train in rapier fencing or other styles. You shall also have plenty of opportunities to see Charley then, so I do hope you’ll forgive me for depriving you of her today.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

It wasn’t a bad deal at all, especially since Arcus had been worrying about where to practice recently.

“Have you warmed up sufficiently, Arcus?”

“Huh?” Arcus failed to answer Charlotte’s question with the same dignity with which she’d asked it.

“Weren’t we going to have a bout?”

“Well... Yes, we were.”

“Then let us begin! I have been very much looking forward to it.”

Seeing the previous matches seemed to have made her even more eager—more so than Arcus was expecting.

“I trust I won’t need to hold back, given what I now know you are capable of?”

On the contrary, Arcus found himself wanting to joke around and ask her to go easy on him, but the mood in the air didn’t allow for it.

It had been his intention to fence with her, but he had his wooden sword in hand; it seemed strange to change his weapon now.

Charlotte Cremelia, daughter to the leader of the eastern houses, stood before Arcus. There was a flash of excitement in her eyes for the long-awaited bout, and she wore the usual training gear, complete with chest protector. Her long, silky hair was tied up out of the way in a simple ponytail, and thin fencing gauntlets protected her slender, delicate fingers. Her hair and skin reflected all the beauty of a sheltered maiden, attracting the admiring gazes of everyone in the hall.

Was her presence a breath of fresh air sweeping through a hall that ordinarily burned with fervor? Or was it a poison that heightened a swordsman’s urge to fight?

The powerful, intimidating air quietly asserting itself around her suggested the latter. It was like static, and it spoke of her own eagerness to begin the bout. An itchy sensation, like he was being pricked by tiny needles, spread across the exposed areas of Arcus’s skin.

Ian Cremelia stood by the wall to observe their match. Still in his traditional noble dress, he stood silently, and with complete calm. Though he held no weapon of his own, there was not a chink to be seen in his mental armor, such was his ability. His gaze felt even sharper than that of Arcus’s actual opponent.

The leader from before had taken up the role of referee. On his signal,

Charlotte and Arcus took a step towards each other.

Looking at her wooden rapier, Arcus noticed that the grip was longer than the other students'. For the moment, he couldn't determine what advantage it would give her.

Charlotte put her weight on her front leg and stretched her back leg out behind her, with her rapier pointed towards Arcus. This was the most basic stance in this style of rapier fencing. Arcus had already seen this stance several times today, but Charlotte's was different in that the tip of her rapier was swaying. In iaido too, there was a movement which necessitated the tip of your sword not be held still; perhaps the two arts were alike in that sense.

"Begin!"

Charlotte was the first to move, leaving no time for either combatant to read the other.

She took a wide step forwards, greeting Arcus with a direct strike. "Shuh!"

Arcus sprang to the side, dodging the attack, but it was a far more accurate lunge than any he had encountered in this hall before. It ended up grazing the top of his left shoulder. He was used to sharp strikes like this from Craib and Noah, but even then it had impressed him.

Arcus made to use his withdrawal to close the gap with her again, but Charlotte reacted at once, jumping back and widening the distance between them.

For the next second, they simply stared at each other in silence.

Charlotte was not making it easy to land a counterattack against her.

Arcus instead decided to go on the offensive. He stepped forward and struck without letting out a sound, but his sword missed. Without missing a beat, he swung at her again and again, but she dodged each and every attack.

I can't get a hit on her...

Perhaps it had been naive to try such a direct approach, just as it was with Craib and Noah. In fact, Charlotte seemed to have even less trouble than they did dodging Arcus's strikes—her *timing* differed from theirs. Her dodges were

neither too slow, nor too early; they were executed at just the perfect moment. She even managed to predict Arcus's attack when it came after a feint, and evaded that too.

Was it *this* which set her apart from the students beneath her? Was this the result of days and days of steady training? Or perhaps she had learned how to focus far beyond what an ordinary human was capable of—just like Arcus.

Whichever it was, it didn't change the fact that one poorly judged, desperate strike from Arcus could easily lead to a devastating counterattack.

After a brief exchange of blows, Arcus parried Charlotte once and then withdrew, only for a flurry of strikes to come right after. Arcus pulled his sword close to his body, moving as little as possible as he fended off the attack. The intensity prevented him from striking back.

Once the flurry was over, Arcus didn't have time to draw breath before the next thrust came—a feint, meant to stop him catching his breath. The next strike was real. Arcus pulled his right foot back and turned his sword to catch Charlotte's before deflecting her blow out to the right. He struck back instantly, aiming for her neck, but his sword sliced up through thin air. Without hesitation, he stepped out in front of her, and spread his arms to open himself up.

Exposing his vulnerabilities caught Charlotte by surprise—enough that she reacted instinctively. Swordsmanship was learned by repeating moves and stances until they were committed to muscle memory, so a lot of the time a fighter was relying on their reflexes more than anything else. A move—especially an attack—made on the spur of the moment was also more likely to be one the fighter was most familiar with—therefore, something simple.

When it came to attacking, Charlotte favored thrusts. Just as Arcus expected, that was exactly how she attacked his exposed chest. The moment the regret crossed her face was the moment Arcus deflected her rapier to the left, and swung his sword into her torso on the way back.

“Hah!”

Charlotte made no move to block his attack, instead swiveling out of the way and opening up the distance between them, while Arcus's sword continued to

turn through the now-empty space.

She could go for his right temple now, and if so, one option was for him to step clear of it. But just as the shadow of her rapier entered his peripheral vision, a mysterious sense of dread flashed through him, sending alarm bells ringing through his mind and triggering the revival of a memory belonging to the man. The memory came from a bout the man had with the elder at his training hall.

Arcus could not let this be a near miss. Instead of stepping back, he dropped into a deep crouch to dodge Charlotte's sweep. Bracing his hands against the wooden floor, he propelled himself to the side on all fours, like a beast.

Charlotte's right hand was not where it should have been, by her rapier's guard, but at its pommel.

"Oh dear, you evaded me."



Had Arcus dodged backwards, this match would be over now.

Sliding your sword's grip through your hand to extend your attack's range was a technique common to various sword arts, especially in those like jujutsu which made use of longer weapons. There, it was a basic move that most all practitioners would know how to use. It was rare in rapier fencing, but still valid.

Charlotte was smiling mischievously, like a child caught mid-prank. Her move could have dealt the finishing blow, but she was treating it like a party trick. Even more terrifying was the ease with which she pulled it off; it required immense control not to let the sword fly from your grip.

It was clear from her face that she was enjoying herself immensely. Arcus would have expected some level of anger from losing her chance at victory, but there was none of that. The corners of her lips were curled in the smallest of smiles. She was the kind of opponent who preferred their battles to be amusing, and sometimes treated them as an opportunity to experiment. It reminded Arcus of the voice that had spoken to him during one of the previous fights.

Suddenly, Charlotte's left hand moved—at first to a position just above her eyes, as though she were shielding them from the sun; when Arcus went to knock her rapier away, it suddenly descended. Arcus instinctively tilted his head, as the rapier came striking up from below.

Leaf Thrust?

He heard her rapier slice through the air right by his ear, creating a burst of wind so powerful, it felt like his skin was being ripped open. Goose bumps spread across his entire body, and yet he'd barely caught a glimpse of what happened.

The move was supposed to go unseen, unlike when one of the students had used it earlier. Arcus only managed to dodge it this time because Noah had used it against him so often.

With his body still bent backwards, Arcus retreated.

That was when Charlotte leaped.

Her footwork was light—barely a second passed where she wasn't hopping—and a single step was capable of taking her *far*. Trying to keep up with her was not the way to beat her; playing by her rules meant certain defeat the moment you lagged behind.

Instead, Arcus decided he would hold his ground, and try to imagine himself a heavy weight as he prepared to receive her strike. He would will himself to be as solid as possible, and tell himself he mustn't be moved by *anything*. He mustn't try to keep up with her; it would be over as soon as he was tempted.

Her attacks will come from the front, and from every angle.

Her stance and center of gravity were ever changing, her footwork supple, as though there were ball bearings in her ankles. It must have been a special technique of this school, if not the Cremelias themselves. By all accounts, it was a miracle that Charlotte hadn't twisted her ankle by now. Arcus knew that people's physical and mental capabilities were different in this world, but this was beyond anything he had seen so far.

Arcus tried several times to strike, but nothing was even close to making contact. She wasn't even bothering to block most of them, instead just hopping out of the way. It was baffling how she managed to avoid every move, as if she knew the trajectory of Arcus's swing before he'd even made it.

What was she seeing in him, to be able to predict his future movements? That was the first question he needed to answer as her opponent.

As Arcus focused, Charlotte's gaze suddenly seemed to pierce right through him, like an arrow through his very core.

"Ngh!"

The next thing he knew, a powerful strike was coming his way. It was pointed right towards his torso.

Panicking, Arcus thrust his sword forward and stumbled back—but Charlotte's attack came with a powerful twisting motion, which allowed her to energetically avoid Arcus's desperate attempt. Just when he'd thought he'd gotten away with dodging by a hair's breadth, the end of Charlotte's rapier made contact with his abdomen.

“Ungh!”

“Point—”

“No, that was too shallow a hit,” Charlotte firmly refused the referee’s judgment.

Too shallow... Perhaps it was. Had her rapier been real, she wouldn’t have inflicted much more than a graze.

Charlotte held her rapier up between her eyes.

Arcus felt a cold, thin layer of sweat forming over his skin. Had he remained unfamiliar with the ability to focus so intensely, that may well have been the finishing move, such was the might behind her attack.

“He has no hope of beating Her Ladyship!”

“He has done well to last this long.”

The students were making comments as they spectated, and Arcus could only agree with what they said. The spot where Charlotte hit him was smarting. Burning Thrust was a rapier technique which made the afflicted area feel like it was on fire; for it to have such a powerful effect when she had barely scraped him showed the intensity of the training Charlotte had endured.

It was a popular technique, and had she used it on his limbs or shoulders, it would surely have dulled Arcus’s movements. Though Arcus could think of one astounding state magician who would brush such an attack off no matter where they were hit, so long as the rapier was blunt.

Charlotte smiled at him. “I am impressed that you managed to avoid that technique.”

“This match would be over were that a real rapier.”

“Perhaps, but we are not on the battlefield now. Our bout is entirely informal, and it doesn’t matter what ‘might’ have been, were this a real match. The weapons we hold are made of wood, so I intend to beat you following the rules of a practice bout.”

“My intention is the same.”

“Oh yes? How about this, then?”

“Huh?”

Charlotte charged forward, leading with the end of her blade. Arcus immediately made to dodge, but her attack wasn't a straightforward thrust; it gave the tip of her rapier a curve.

“Grk!”

Arcus twisted his body reflexively to avoid the attack that came swinging into the edge of his vision. No sooner had he realized he'd made himself vulnerable than a powerful strike came for his front.

If this hit, it would be over.

Arcus threw himself onto the floor. Pulling his legs up, he engaged his back muscles to spin around, sweeping his sword out at ground level. Just like before, this was a desperate effort at some sort of counterattack, and Charlotte hopped over his sword with ease.

Arcus slid his legs forward and his rear back, so that he was kneeling on the floor with his hips raised slightly, a position that was typical of iaido. Supporting his sword with his left hand, he placed his right on its grip, as though getting ready to pull it from a sheath.

As Charlotte came in to strike again, he used his legs like a spring to jump up and pulled his sword out from its invisible sheath to counter her—that was his intention, at least, but Charlotte's attack never came.

She was instead standing stock still, as though she knew exactly what he was planning. Meanwhile, Arcus was off balance. Anybody would have taken the chance to land the finishing blow.

But still Charlotte did nothing. It was just like before, when Arcus had the sense that she'd seen right through him. In fact, neither of them had seemed to sense an opportunity to snatch victory for the entire match. It was getting ever stranger. The referee didn't seem sure what he should be doing either. In normal circumstances, Arcus's broken stance would mean defeat, but Charlotte was still in a fighting stance, and she was saying nothing.

The referee studied her. Keeping his guard up, Arcus slowly got to his feet.

“Charley. I can’t say I’m impressed by you showing him *that* move.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it, brother? This is our family’s training hall, and everyone here is a trusted individual. I need to practice where I can, else I’ll lose my touch.”

“Honestly...” Ian sighed quietly. Even he couldn’t stop Charlotte once she got a rapier in her hand.

“Here I go.”

Arcus nodded silently.

When her attack came, her rapier’s end curved just as before. As Arcus recalled, it was a move that existed in modern fencing too. It took advantage of the blade’s flexibility, allowing the bearer to attack the opponent in front of them from behind.

But Charlotte’s rapier was made of wood. It wasn’t flexible—yet she was managing this technique all the same. In which case, it could only be an illusion. That, or there was some technique that made the wood supple, but Arcus knew that wasn’t the case; Charlotte’s rapier wasn’t engraved with anything.

The only possibility was that his senses were being tricked in some way.

“Human perception is imperfect. It interprets phenomena as conveniently as possible. Listen closely. What we see before us is not fluid motion. When there are gaps, our brain creates images to fill them in.”

They were the words of the old man. During a bout with the man from Arcus’s dreams, the elder made his sword disappear as if by magic. Charlotte was likely doing something similar. Her rapier was not changing shape; his eyes simply couldn’t keep up with its true form.

Arcus opened up a large gap between them, devoting his energy to dodging and observing. When he did, he noticed Charlotte’s grip loosening now and then, making her rapier vibrate.

“Ah.”

He'd cracked it.

It was like a pencil.

It all came back to him then. A memory of the man showing a trick to a group of friends in his elementary school classroom. A trick which made the pencil in his hand seem to bend when he held it at one end or in its center and waved it. Supporting it at one point and waving it over and over created the illusion.

Charlotte was making use of the same principles. By loosening her grip and sending small vibrations through her rapier, it shook from side to side, making the tip look curved like the rapiers used in modern fencing.

Making the tip of the rapier shake was the first step. The reason the grip of Charlotte's rapier was longer than the other students' was presumably so she could shake it over a wider range. Arcus reminded himself that it was just an illusion; her rapier's trajectory was not curved, nor was its end really where it appeared to be.

In which case, there was no point in focusing on the warping tip. Unfortunately, Arcus's reflexes were such that he ended up dodging anyway, even when he didn't need to—and that was exactly what Charlotte wanted. It was frustrating how his intuition pushed him to act, even when the logical part of his brain told him not to. He wanted to call Charlotte's trick dirty, if not for the fact he had done the exact same thing to her by making himself purposely vulnerable earlier.

If he could concentrate on what her hand was doing, he should have been able to find a way out of this. Arcus forced his body to stop acting on instinct and aimed a hard blow at Charlotte's loose hand.

"Uh!"

It worked—but it wasn't enough to make Charlotte drop her rapier. She must have tightened her grip again just before the impact. Even this move had been predicted, if only at the very last second. Charlotte had already demonstrated the strength in her ankles, but she possessed a powerful grip too.

"You knew how to counter that one too, did you?"

"Once I realized what you were doing, My Lady."

“You mean to say you saw through it?!” Ian interjected, looking both surprised and suspicious.

“Only by coincidence, My Lord.”

“I see, hence why you aimed for her hand. I would ask you not to disclose what you have learned.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Arcus paused. “So long as I am not subject to a similar situation as before.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My servant says I have a tendency to be careless. There is a chance my tongue may slip, should I suddenly remember the technique I’ve just observed. It’s merely a possibility, of course...”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Not at all, My Lord. I am simply lamenting my own inadequacy. Nor do I think this would put the art in danger. Revealing the secret between one or two techniques should not be enough to harm the Cremelia combat style.”

“Interesting. And what is your motivation?”

“It will not be long before I am cut off from the Raytheft House completely. I must therefore take measures, such as this one, to protect myself.”

“Very well. I shall be careful.”

Arcus returned Ian’s smile. He wasn’t a fan of multilayered conversations like this, but he did want to get Ian back in some way for his deception.

He turned back to Charlotte. “Sorry to keep you waiting, My Lady.”

“Not at all. I was rather entertained.”

“Charley...”

“Brother. Do not forget that you ignored my objections.”

An uncomfortable expression rose to Ian’s face. It crossed Arcus’s mind then that Charlotte might have used that technique repeatedly precisely to bring about this outcome. Now that he had “entertained” Charlotte, as she put it, perhaps it would be wise not to press the matter any further. Threatening her

brother too much might prevent Arcus and Charlotte from maintaining a good relationship in the future.

Charlotte would be able to read any careless strikes Arcus might make. So, instead of facing her head-on, Arcus changed his stance so that his body was angled, allowing him to attack from a greater distance. His stances so far had all been head-on; this, he assumed, would catch her out.

Well, Charlotte?

As Arcus stepped forward, he sharpened his focus—and then the anticipatory power came back to him.

His surroundings slowed. Charlotte made to dodge. Before Arcus had finished stepping—

“What?”

She’d evaded his strike. That wasn’t what surprised Arcus. What surprised him was that she had started moving before he had, jumping backwards even though he hadn’t even started his attack yet.

Charlotte smiled. “That was an interesting move. It almost hit too.”

Her words didn’t register with Arcus. He was far too preoccupied with what he’d just seen from her.

It simply wasn’t possible. Arcus had been using his intense powers of focus, slowing down Charlotte’s movements. It couldn’t have been any physical ability or swift reflexes that allowed her to avoid his attack, else he would have seen her moving much more quickly. Somehow, she had managed to dodge without moving fast enough to do so.

The bottom line was that she’d started dodging before he started attacking—even though it should have been impossible. So how *had* she done it?

Arcus found himself asking, “My Lady. What can you *see*?”

The change in Charlotte’s expression was instantaneous.

Perhaps she possessed it: the power to see what could not be seen by the naked eye. A command of the mind’s eye the old man spoke of.

Arcus recalled the continuation of his dream from that morning.

“How to defeat an opponent who can detect the future, you ask? It depends on how they are doing this ‘detecting,’ as you say. Is it a smell? Intuition? Something they have read? Something they can see?”

“If it is something they have read, it may not be so difficult. It means their information, and therefore their own moves, are following a written script, one which they must recreate in their mind. Though they will know the general direction of things, the details will likely be hazy, and they won’t have the intuition needed to face an opponent.”

“Then there are those who may use smell or intuition to dodge an opponent’s strikes or use the trajectory of their attacks against them. Assuming they use their skills to move ahead of you, what you must do is strike between the time they receive their premonition, and the time they start to act on it. If they cannot act, their premonition is useless.”

“Say they can see the outcome of certain moves. All you must do then is move so quickly that their eyes cannot keep up with you. A human’s sense of sight is an unreliable thing. The brain will fill in gaps to connect two things which may otherwise seem incoherent, but its work is imperfect. If somebody can only see what will be, they cannot see the path taken to get there; they cannot see whether their opponent will leave open any gaps, and nor will they be able to react to anything unexpected before the image they have seen becomes a reality.”

“What do you mean these methods all sound the same? If you can’t outperform your opponent in the first place, they won’t be using these powers anyway. Other tricks you could use are stealing your opponent’s sight, or interfering with the future they see and make it less certain—if you can.”

It was a mysterious course of conversation. The man was seriously considering these unrealistic “powers,” which seemed like something out of a fantasy novel more than anything else. And the elder took him seriously in turn, responding with ways in which one might combat these skills.

Though nonsensical, the elder's words might have been everything Arcus needed.

To counter an opponent who could see the future, either you took away their sight, did something they couldn't react to whether they knew it was going to happen or not, or interfered with the movements that came after they received their vision.

What was it the elder had said after that?

"If you have exhausted every trick up your sleeve without success, then unleash that most powerful move. That will be your only remaining option if you are determined to put up a real fight."

That most powerful move. The elder had never mentioned such a thing until then. He'd always poo-pooed the idea of secret techniques and lethal moves as fiction. His philosophy was that there was no such thing as a surefire attack that could fell any opponent, because sword arts were all about perfection of form through repetition, and earned experience. A match was all about finding the tiniest of gaps to strike your opponent, plain and simple. There was nothing heroic or flashy about it. That was what the elder had always said.

Yet now he spoke of a "powerful move," as though it were the final weapon in a swordsman's arsenal. That suggested that he had a specific move in mind.

There were three basic types of strike. Thrusting, sweeping, and slicing downwards from head-on. The aim of sword arts could be summarized like so: to find the gaps in your opponent's awareness, and land a deadly strike before they did. Even the most straightforward swordsman had to be capable of doling out a surprise attack; if no vulnerabilities arose during the exchanging of blows or mudslinging, then a successful surprise attack was the only remaining path to victory.

The most effective surprise attack would be from a reverse draw, but when it came to sword arts, strength and speed were everything, and only a dead straight, complete swing made full use of both. Adding any sort of trick to such a swing would only slow it down, and so a powerful move, according to the elder, must have been one which fell within one of the three categories of strike.

The first move to fit that description which came to Arcus's mind was his *kan'are* paired with a one-handed lunge. But even that was too complex, he decided.

More fitting would be a simple downward strike through the opponent's center line. This was one of the fundamental moves of the sword arts in the man's country. It was the move taught the moment a student got hold of a sword, leaving not a single practitioner unaware of it.

The first step was to bring the arms in close to the body, and then stretch them forwards. You shouldn't grip the sword too tightly until you swung, at which point your grip needed to be just strong enough to wring out a tea towel. The swing was to be stopped when the sword was perfectly parallel to the floor, and then you would repeat the process a thousand, or two thousand, times a day. This constant training was what made it the most powerful move there was. That was how Arcus understood it.

It sucks I can't use my left arm—but I think I'm making the right choice.

Arcus didn't know that many techniques to start with, especially when "technique" was defined strictly, so perhaps it was only natural that his conclusion was to go back to basics. His newfound power of intense concentration only added to the significance of this simple strike.

An image appeared in Arcus's mind then, of a stance that the elder sometimes took. He would raise his sword and position the grip close to the right side of his face. While his right hand gripped it tightly, his left remained as loose as possible, supporting the grip of the sword lightly by his right forearm with its elbow resting on his chest. Though Arcus did note that the lack of power from the left arm would likely make the resulting swing weaker.

The elder's right arm and sword were one, and the tip of the blade pointed straight up towards the heavens. All that remained was for him to move within striking distance of his opponent, and bring his sword straight down.

Arcus mimicked the stance and controlled his senses to slow his surroundings once again.

A simultaneous strike from Charlotte would be welcome, not a threat. He was already prepared for defeat, having cast all thoughts of victory from his mind.

This was a strike not only against his opponent, but against her technique. A single strike and nothing more.

Just then, Arcus spotted Purce in his peripheral vision. He was standing at the entrance to the hall, speaking to somebody he'd brought with him. Arcus's senses were too tightly focused on the match to be able to make out anything from their conversation.

He did, however, hear Purce hum with interest—at the same moment Charlotte took a great leap backwards. Her grip on her rapier was tighter; something had her flustered.

Charlotte's premonition did not come from text. She knew too much for that.

So was it smell, intuition, or sight?

When Arcus asked her what she could see, she'd reacted; sight was the most likely culprit. And that meant there was only one answer to his question:

Charlotte Cremelia could see the future.

There was also the question of *how far* she could see, but one thing was for certain. All of her dodges so far had been informed by this ability. It seemed she wasn't able to make constant use of it, as there were times she fell a step behind, but she'd managed to evade all of Arcus's most decisive strikes.

Keeping his stance, Arcus revisited his idea.

As he did so, Charlotte's expression stiffened; he had just made the decision to switch from a head-on strike to a one-handed *kan'are* lunge. When his decision changed, so had the future. That was what Charlotte saw, and that was what she reacted to. From that, Arcus deduced that her vision was focused on the short-term future. If she was capable of seeing the long term too, there would be no meaning to his little experiment. There were still some details that remained hazy.

Either way, the fact that it put Arcus at a disadvantage was undisputable, like he was playing poker with a cheater who could constantly read his hand, knew when he was bluffing, and could react accordingly. Nevertheless, even if Charlotte was able to see the tip of Arcus's sword at her throat, it was still his best option at the moment. Being able to apprehend his move made no

difference if she lacked the ability to stop it.

For the first time, Arcus truly felt that *this* was a real sword fight. This was the first time in the match that they were actively trying to work out the other's abilities, and waiting for the most opportune moment to strike.

Arcus moved first, sliding the soles of his feet across the floor to close the gap between him and Charlotte. It seemed she hadn't yet seen what he was about to do; there was no reaction from her.

Arcus held out his wooden sword as if to strike her, but instead of letting their weapons clash, he kept sliding until he was positioned behind her. Once he was right by the wall, he turned around and ran towards her.

The first step was taken while keeping his upper body completely still.

Hop.

On the second, he carefully adjusted his pace.

Step.

Then he was accelerating, and he took a single leap forward.

Jump!

Then he was using his signature technique, *kan'are*. The sudden acceleration of this move threw off the timing of any offensive or defensive counters your opponent might make, because you ended up right in front of them before they could react.

Arcus now needed to strike with a hard and fast lunge from his right hand, a move he had used when taking out Dyssea and the Black Panther Cavalry. With that, his attack would be over. All that was left was to transform himself into an arrow and rush Charlotte. Her only recourse should be to try and dodge out of his way. Blocking a strike like this required pinpoint accuracy and perfect mastery of the sword.

But Charlotte made no attempt to evade. The second Arcus had his blade at her throat, he witnessed her thrust out her rapier in the same manner. She had her weapon aimed precisely at his throat in a counterstrike. Without dodging, parrying, or even any regard for victory, she had chosen a simultaneous strike.

All so that she wouldn't lose.

"It appears this bout is over."

Ian wasted no time in voicing the conclusion, prompting the referee to put things to an end.

"Match done!"

The tension in the air instantly deflated with the referee's resounding declaration. Everyone around Charlotte and Arcus had been watching with bated breath, and suddenly the hall was filled with the sound of students gasping for air.

"A surprising move," Arcus remarked.

"I felt I had no other choice. Had you changed trajectories as you accelerated, any attempt to evade would have resulted in my loss."

Now Arcus was sure that Charlotte had visions of the future; from the sound of it, visions which laid out a number of possible outcomes. Arcus had admired Sue for her powers in the past, but now it seemed Charlotte and her abilities were also worthy of a deeper admiration than he had granted her before.

"Now I no longer have any confidence that I could best you..."

It was a feeling that Arcus was growing used to. Whenever he felt he had become a little stronger, somebody even more powerful showed up to put him in his place. It was true both for his magic skills and his sword skills.

"That was an astounding technique. To think you could move like that without the use of magic..."

Arcus looked up to see Charlotte shiver once, then twice, as though briefly afflicted by cold. At the very least, he had managed to instill in her a small rush of terror.

"I'm...a little tired." Arcus sighed deeply, then slumped to the floor. He had sharpened his focus several times during that fight, and now the fatigue was closing in on him.

Ian stepped up to him. "I never expected you to draw with Charley."

“I was lucky that my plan worked, My Lord. That’s all.”

“Oh? It didn’t appear to me as though you had a plan.”

Unsurprising, as the two of them had simply executed moves one after the other. There was little to do with tactics.

“Where did you learn your techniques, Arcus?” Ian asked. “I recognize none of them, despite the fact that I have experimented with several different schools.”

“They are...from books. I read about them, then practiced those techniques independently.” It was the best excuse he could come up with without giving away the secret of the man’s world.

“I caught glimpses of rapier fencing, yet at the very core of your swordsmanship was something quite different. Do these books make up the basis of your technique?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“It is surprising that you made such a choice, without even knowing whether what you read was widely taught in the real world.”

“I believed there must have been some merit to them, else nobody would have taken the effort to write them down.”

“Hmm. Charley, did you recognize what Arcus did just now?”

“A one-handed lunge,” she replied. “Admittedly one which seemed to travel too fast for the naked eye.”

“And how did he do it?”

“I cannot say. It was all I could do to keep up with Arcus’s attack.”

Ian looked back at Arcus, as though anticipating an explanation.

“I was pulling it off before I knew it,” was all he said.

“If that is true, then you have extraordinary talent. I should like to test it for myself, once your left arm is healed, of course.”

“Certainly, My Lord.”

Purce approached from the entrance to the hall, and Arcus dipped his head in greeting. “Please forgive me for the state I am currently in, My Lord.”

“And my apologies that my son and daughter should take up your time like this.”

“Not at all, My Lord. It was an edifying experience, for more than my swordsmanship.”

“I have now borne witness to said swordsmanship,” Purce said.

“Please accept my apologies for bringing in techniques which did not adhere to this school.”

“Your constant self-deprecation is somewhat tiresome.” Purce’s words cleared the air a little.

“Yes, My Lord.” Arcus dipped his head in apology.

“Your technique lacks self-preservation, Arcus.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“As I recall, Crucible’s swordsmanship is rather different.”

“Your Lordship is correct. It is my understanding that my uncle’s technique assumes the fighter will survive, whereas my technique is based on a *need* to survive.”

Purce gave a thoughtful hum.

“I have a certain understanding of sword fighting too,” Arcus continued.

“When one picks up the sword and faces down the opponent, one must forget oneself and instead work to overcome the challenge before them.”

That had been the man’s philosophy, as far as Arcus could tell. If Arcus was going to make use of his techniques, he needed to put himself into the mindset to match.

“Although, as a magician, I am not confident in my ability to live like that.”

“That statement is at odds with the spirit you displayed earlier. There was a ghastliness about that last technique—no, it was there even before that. Not to mention what I heard of your standoff with Bargue Gruba. Forgetting oneself

and overcoming the challenge before you? You set aside your fear and faced the beast head on. That makes you fully qualified as the son to a martial family. No, in fact, you were qualified even before then...”

Arcus had done similarly in his fight against Marquess Gaston. In some ways, this drive had been with him ever since that showdown.

“Have you any thoughts to share, Dinberg?” Purce turned to an older man in a butler’s uniform.

This was likely the figure Arcus caught sight of during the bout. His height seemed to be between five foot two and five foot six. He had gray hair, wore a monocle, and had a rapier on his hip. The man had a slender build, and he carried himself perfectly. Every last one of his movements was graceful.

Arcus’s first thought was that he must be a tidy, elderly butler. He fit the stereotypical description from books in the man’s world to a T, as did the air around him.

The tension in the hall tightened further as the others caught sight of him, and the nerves were clear on the faces which regarded him, including those of Ian and Charlotte.

“I agree with Your Lordship completely. I had much the same interpretation,” the man replied in a calm voice.

Charlotte, her expression remaining stiff, greeted him then. “It is a pleasure to see you again, Caldato.”

“My, Lady Charlotte. Please, do not feel the need to address this old man so formally, My Lady.”

“Sir, it is only right to treat a master such as yourself with respect.”

Presumably, this butler was a skilled swordsman then. Though Arcus didn’t know enough to be able to judge for himself, it was obvious enough from the stiffness in Charlotte and Ian’s countenance.

Caldato looked at Arcus. “Silver hair and crimson eyes. I daresay I know who you are already.”

“My name is Arcus Raytheft.”

“So it is you. Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. I am Caldato Dinberg.”

“You already know of me?”

“I have heard rumors. Good and bad.”

“How embarrassing...”

“No, you have proven that you live up to those rumors. Namely, that you are much like a jack-in-the-box, full of surprises.”

“I see...”

Arcus couldn't help but wonder where this elderly butler had heard such a comparison. There weren't many people he could think of who might describe him in such a way in the first place, let alone one who was likely to know this man.

Arcus whispered to Charlotte. “Who's this guy?”

“Caldato studied rapier fencing under my grandfather. I have heard his abilities match those of my father.”

“He's that good, huh?”

“Indeed. I have faced him many times, but at my level, I never stood a chance.”

Meaning, since Arcus was at best equal with Charlotte, he wouldn't stand a chance either.

“Caldato,” Charlotte said, no longer keeping her voice hushed. “What business have you with us today? You do not appear to be preparing for training.”

“I am here because I heard from His Lordship that Arcus was visiting.”

“What?” Arcus blinked.

“That's right, Arcus. Today you showed me something quite intriguing. I should like to pay you a visit in the near future.” With that, Caldato bowed politely.

After their exchange with Purce and Caldato, Charlotte and Arcus left the training hall together. They sat on a pair of rocks carved into stools. Finally free of the tension within the hall, Arcus raised his arms in a long stretch.

Charlotte's expression was pensive as she broke the silence. "Arcus. You know what I can see, don't you?"

Arcus hesitated. "The future, right?"

"It isn't anything so certain as that. It is closer to foresight. That is, the most likely outcome."

"Foresight... Hm."

Given what Arcus observed, it made sense. If what she saw was a certain future, there would be no opportunity for her to change the outcome. That she was able to anticipate events seemed a more accurate description.

"I'm impressed you managed to work it out from our bout alone," she continued.

"I knew there was something you were picking up on that went beyond your five senses. I worked out that it came from your vision, like you were seeing images, or my trajectory...and that led me to realize you were seeing the future."

"Our bout informed all of that?"

"It was the changes in your expression which tipped me off that something was up."

"And yet you jumped all the way to the nonsensical conclusion that I could predict your next move? Normally, such a thought shouldn't even cross your mind."

"Are you sure? This world is full of people who possess abilities that extend beyond the scope of mere 'talent.' Why shouldn't your foresight be among those?"

"I suppose you're right. I have heard of the existence of incredible abilities like that myself." Charlotte nodded, seemingly satisfied with Arcus's response. Then she frowned. "You know, when you say 'this world,' you make it sound as

though you know of another.”

“N-No, I just wanted to emphasize the scale of the world! They say that *everybody* with power, physical and authoritative, has these abilities.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. Although I still think your deduction was a little wild.”

“Well, maybe it was because I’d heard a discussion on the mind’s eye before.”

“The mind’s eye?”

“Yes. The power to sense something beyond your senses. Some people apparently have abilities like that.”

“I wonder if that idea stems from the Ancient Chronicles.”

“I think so, yeah.”

Of course it was actually from the man’s world, but this was a much more convenient explanation.

Charlotte turned to Arcus, her eyes tinged with anxiety. “Arcus... Do you think having this power counts as cheating?”

“Cheating?”

“Mm. I can see...the future, I suppose. Something that nobody else can. Strictly speaking, perhaps it is an ability which has nothing to do with the quality of my swordsmanship.”

“I disagree. It’s a perfectly fine talent to have.”

“You think so?”

“You can think of it as cheating if you want, but it’s still a natural ability. And if that’s cheating, then so is being tall, or being a certain sex. It makes me a cheater too.”

“How so?”

“My weirdness is what makes me a cheater. By your logic, there are cheaters all over the place. Sue, with her leadership skills, Bague Gruba, the insane soldier from the Empire. They’re all people with the abilities I was talking about before. I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about.”

“Yes. You may be right.”

“Even if it bothers you now, I don’t think it will for long. You don’t have any choice but to use it when you’re on the brink of defeat, right?”

“I would use it, without a doubt.”

Arcus paused. “It is kinda cheating though.”

“Excuse me?! You just called it an ‘ability’!”

“Yeah, but it’s unfair, being able to see the future.”

“You haven’t fully explained why you’re a cheater! Talk about unfair!”

“My thing’s a way smaller deal than yours.”

“From your perspective, perhaps. Not to mention you’re a magician, as well as a competent swordfighter. Now that truly is unfair.”

“Nothing unfair about it. I’ve trained hard to use magic and fight with a sword, and these are the results.”

“You make it sound as though I *don’t* train.”

“I didn’t say that; you’re being paranoid. I wasn’t implying anything about you.”

The pair glared sullenly at each other.

But neither could keep up the act for long, and they quickly burst into fits of laughter, intense enough to drive them both to tears.

“I feel as though this is the first time I’ve truly been able to be myself around you, Arcus.”

“Yeah. We’ve never really spoken this honestly with each other, huh?”

Perhaps it was simply on account of the fact that they’d never had many opportunities to talk.

Whatever the reason, by the end of his visit, Arcus felt closer to her.

Today, Arcus was heading down the capital’s main street for the Magician’s Guild to give one of his regular reports to the Guildmaster, Godwald Sylvester.

On his way, he overheard some nasty gossip indeed.

“If you don’t stop crying, Vajra will come to our house while you’re sleeping!”

The warning came from a mother attempting to soothe her young, sobbing child. It was a variant of the common old wives’ tales of monsters or spirits who punished children for being habitual nuisances. Arcus remembered similar stories he had read as a child, of monsters who ate these bawling children.

The child clammed up at once; the threat unfortunately seemed highly effective.

The mother smiled. “That’s it. Now, keep being good, and you won’t have to worry about the scary old magician.”

Arcus could picture the dejected expression that would take over the Guildmaster’s face had he heard the exchange. He was a sensitive man, despite his grave features. There was some truth to the old adage advising not to judge a book by its cover.

Although not as revered as Gastarque Rondiel, the Guildmaster was a hero to the people of Lainur, and Arcus wasn’t sure how he felt about those same citizens speaking about him like a cannibalistic bugbear. He could accept that cities were breeding grounds for rumors, good and bad, factual and fictional, but even then it seemed a bit much.

When Arcus reached the Guild, he was greeted by Godwald and his elderly secretary, Balgeuse. Though Arcus didn’t consider himself important enough to be greeted by the Guildmaster himself, he put it down to the fact that his aethometer was very much a matter of utmost importance. He was used to being welcomed by them now, so the pleasantries passed quickly.

“I know what young Arcus is thinking, sir,” Balgeuse said, “and it is that you are as terrifying as ever today.”

“E-Excuse me?!” Arcus spluttered.

“Balgeuse.” Godwald sighed his servant’s name and glared at him.

Balgeuse had either learned to read minds or hit the mark dead-on, completely blind; Arcus couldn’t *not* panic.

Godwald's reproachful stare did nothing to deter Balgeuse at all. "Call it intuition, but it wouldn't surprise me if he had heard the gossip that has been going around recently."

Arcus swallowed.

"What gossip would that be, Balgeuse?"

"It's nothing major. There are plenty of people out there nursing a grudge against you, sir, wherever one might go."

"Ah."

Balgeuse's cryptic explanation seemed to have gotten the message across. The Guildmaster currently stood as leader of the state magicians, a position that was prone to deep resentment both outside and inside Lainur's borders. The gossip must have been started as a small-scale attack against him by his detractors. How insidious.

"I sympathize completely, sir," Arcus said.

"Well. I suppose being feared is better than the alternative."

"Yes. At the very least, I doubt anybody would try to take advantage of you."

"Chin up, sir," Balgeuse said. "Doesn't your wife always say how much she adores your face?"

"Might I remind you that it was you who brought this subject up, Balgeuse," Godwald pointed out with another glare.

"Oh. Was it?"

Arcus had a vague sense that such antics between master and servant seemed awfully familiar, but he couldn't quite place his finger on it. Apart from anything else, it was news to him that Godwald was married, although he supposed it would be even stranger for a man in his position to be single.

"Would you like me to relay your inner thoughts again, Arcus?" Balgeuse offered.

"N-No, thank you!" Arcus responded quickly.

Balgeuse laughed. Arcus was worried that the old butler might spend the

entire meeting threatening to expose his more impolite notions, but when he turned to look at the Guildmaster's terrifying face (his neutral expression, to be clear), a comforting nod eased his fears. It seemed that Godwald was on his side.

Arcus returned his thoughts to the business at hand. He was here to report to the Guildmaster on his recent activities—namely, the work he was conducting within the Guild itself, what he was doing, and what he had done to improve those processes.

As the three of them toured the rooms Arcus was using, he gave a detailed rundown.

The silver and Sorcerer's Silver required for tempering had become easier to obtain, and now he was devising a way to store it. Arcus had also developed an experimental bimetal which he hoped would assist in his efforts to make the aethometer more sensitive. These were the only points he had to report regarding the aethometer. The construction of the device was so simple that any improvement in the technology behind it was that much more difficult.

As they stepped out of the building containing Arcus's second production line, they came across a certain woman: a magician in a pure white dress and an elegant, wide-brimmed hat in the same color. She was Muller Quint, also known as Welcome Rain.

She was in her late twenties or very early thirties, with slender limbs and skin as pale as porcelain. Her eyes were obscured by the veil on her hat, but her lips were held in their usual reserved smile.

Once Muller had finished greeting Godwald and Balgeuse, Arcus bowed to her.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Madame Quint."

"I came to the Guild when I heard you would be about."

"Thank you for going out of your way."

"On the contrary, I must apologize for imposing on you without warning. How is your arm?"

“I can move it much more than before, so I think it’s healing nicely. Had it not been for you and the healers, I would have been in a fix.”

“Please, do not feel obliged. You have done much for me, and they were His Royal Highness’s orders too. I sincerely hope it will be fully recovered soon.”

“Thank you very much for your concern.”

Arcus and Muller dipped their heads at each other back and forth throughout the conversation, a pattern that was quickly establishing itself whenever the two spoke. In Muller’s case, it was a question of temperament, while Arcus had picked up the habit of excessive bowing from the man’s world, meaning their bowing battles never ended. It was a classic case of gratitude begetting gratitude.

Eventually, it took Godwald clearing his throat to put an end to the constant string of “No, I should be thanking you,” and words of that nature.

“Has the aethometer been of any use to you, Madame Quint?” Arcus inquired.

“Yes, it has. Healing magic is difficult to learn, but thanks to you, the number of magicians who have mastered it has increased. Your aethometer really has come into its own.”

“That’s wonderful to hear.”

“I can only thank you for allowing us priority access—not to mention everything else you have done!”

Arcus had shared the aethometer with the medical sector around the same time he’d passed it to the army. Next on his list was probably going to be the Institute, but it looked like his device would be in high demand within the medical sector for some time to come.

“Is the aethometer really that helpful to medicine?” Arcus asked Godwald privately when he spotted an opportune moment.

“It is, yes. There is a constant shortage of healers. Advanced healing magic in particular is difficult to learn, so those who can use it often need to be able to work at all times of day and night. Upon the introduction of your aethometer,

these advanced practitioners were able to delegate their tasks to younger magicians. I hear Welcome Rain cried tears of joy.”

“Really?”

“An abundance of work infringes on rest time, not to mention time spent with one’s family. A lighter burden for each magician benefits everyone.”

It wasn’t like the matter was that different in the man’s world. The news often spoke of how skilled doctors’ schedules were packed down to the second, to the extent Arcus wondered if they ever found any time to sleep at all.

This explained why, when Arcus had visited the medical office at the Guild to have his arm treated, the magicians always welcomed him so warmly.

Balgeuse turned his gaze outside. “Once the aethometer is officially announced, we may need to construct a bronze statue of young Arcus here at the Guild. Right over there.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” Muller said. “I’m sure the entire medical community would welcome the idea!”

“No, no, no, I really don’t deserve that much...”

“Arcus, you must realize yourself that this is indeed the response your achievements merit. Statues are often built to celebrate somebody’s contributions...and in your case I can picture quite an impressive one,” Godwald explained, sounding almost resentful.

“Y-Yes, sir...”

The Guildmaster has his own large statue here in the Guild, while a statue of Gastarque graced the entrance to Lainur’s palace. Muller also had one. Though she was young, she had contributed much to the medical sector, and saved many lives.

“You will face the same embarrassment some day,” Godwald finished with a sinister smile.

“Yes, he will!” Muller laughed darkly.

Indeed, right now Arcus couldn’t think of anything more humiliating, and it looked like the state magicians knew *exactly* how he felt.

The foursome moved to another block on the grounds which had been reserved for Arcus. Here, he was developing inventions unrelated to the aethometer, funded entirely by the Guild. For the most part, he was free to experiment as he liked here, an exceptional privilege he was granted thanks to the aethometer's wild success. At the same time, it was laced with the unspoken expectation that he would create something else that would benefit the country's magicians.

"What is this box here, Arcus?" Godwald asked.

"It's a device which creates water."

"Water?"

"That's right. It can generate between ten and twenty liters of water in a single day. Let it build up, and it becomes a storage device."

"That sounds like quite the mechanism. How does it work?"

"The theory itself is simple. You simply insert a metal body that's engraved to cool its surroundings, and then water is produced via condensation. It allows for the stable extraction of water even in places without a natural source."

"That sounds convenient indeed."

"It does have its limitations though. Since it takes its water from the air, it cannot be used in arid areas," Arcus explained, opening the box to reveal the water it had already collected. He then pulled out a bottle he was using to store the water.

"It certainly looks clean," said Godwald.

"It is," Arcus said. "It's been through several filters, so it's perfectly safe to drink."

"Fil...?"

"It would usually go through a membrane to remove tiny bits of dirt, but in this case I've substituted all kinds of purifying seals, sand, and charcoal. I think this creation could contribute a little to solving our water problems."

"A little? A *little*, you say? By purifying water..." Godwald grumbled, and Arcus couldn't get a good read on his face.

Apparently he didn't think much of it, and suddenly Arcus was hit with concern. This was sure to limit his budget, and in turn the scope of his experiments.

“Um, I've also got this electric kett—a device which heats water on demand, a device which uses ultraviolet rays for sterilization—I got the idea for that from Sol Glasses—and this gas mask. I was also thinking of making an oxygen concentrator and microwave, but I'm still working on those. They'll be a little trickier.”

For some reason, Godwald was frowning and keeping his silence. Arcus wanted to say something, but quickly gave up. He felt like a child who was being pushed to pile excuse on top of excuse to hide something bad he'd done.



“A water-heating device and a gas mask,” Muller mulled, looking at Arcus’s other inventions. “And what was that you mentioned about sterilization?”

“Ultraviolet sterilization... Well, I think there are some illnesses that come from food or water, and this device will be able to get rid of the causes of some of them. It can mostly be used jointly with boiling water, but this lets us give foods that cannot be boiled the same treatment.”

Muller seemed interested in everything Arcus had to offer. Aside from the ultraviolet device, there was the kettle, for making tea in a jiffy, and though the gas mask wasn’t strictly a medical instrument, Muller appeared to have interpreted it as such. Though when Arcus thought about it, the majority of his inventions here would find their use in a medical setting.

“Hm? There is a Sol Glass here, but it isn’t lighting up,” Godwald said. “Not to mention this cover here...”

“It’s activated by a switch. When you press this button, the dial on the inside elevates, connecting the two seals and making the device work. It’s more complicated than a Sol Glass in a container... The cover is to stop you coming into contact with it and hurting yourself.”

“This is what you call a ‘switch’?” Godwald asked, pressing the button which turned on the UV light. “I see, this is a very interesting idea. I can see its potential for use beyond Sol Glasses too...”

“The Sol Glass in this room—the one up there—is also turned on and off via the pulling of this cord. I’m currently researching the remote use of these switches.”

“Hmm...” The switch, at least, seemed to pique Godwald’s curiosity. He was trying out different switches in the room and gazing at them with interest.

Sol Glasses emitted a constant light, and the only way to block that light was to cover them with a box or cloth. That annoyed Arcus, who was already using light pulls in his own home.

“It really is fascinating,” Muller said. “I’m especially taken with this water-purifying device, and this water-heating device. I would like to have a sit down and discuss these with you at some point, if I may.”

“Certainly,” Arcus replied. “I will arrange a date with you later.”

At its core, the purpose of Arcus’s research was to secure funding, and had been ever since his aethometer. In return for lending out his tech, he’d receive money and materials he could use for his research, or occasionally a different technology that was otherwise unavailable to him. Muller had been especially generous, helping to beef up his budgets and providing him with soma.

“This makes me regret not taking my seal studies more seriously,” Muller lamented.

“You had your medical research to focus on,” Godwald assured her. “There is nothing wrong with leaving seals to the experts.”

Next, Arcus showed them his replica fountain pen.

“This is the last invention which I’ve got a prototype for, but it has nothing to do with magic. You can use it for writing.”

“So it’s a pen?” Godwald asked.

“Yes, sir. A cartridge fountain pen. When you run out of ink, you can replace the cartridge to keep on using it.”

Most writing implements in this world required constant dipping into an inkwell. With this pen, the user was free to write whenever they wished. A ball pen would have been even easier to use, but it had proven too difficult for Arcus to recreate.

“You don’t need an inkwell for this?” Godwald said.

“No. You can write whenever and wherever you like. Although it can run out of ink, of course.”

“Arcus, why did you never tell us of this before?” Balgeuse pressed.

“Hm? W-Well, I thought I could just tell you now, during my regular review.”

“You ought to be careful. You keep this to yourself, and you may find a lot of angry clerical staff at your door.”

“I-I’ll be careful. Here, Mr. Balgeuse, I’ll give you one.”

“Thank you. This will assist in my record of your report quite nicely.” Balgeuse

beamed at the pen.

“Glad to hear it...” Arcus said nervously.

Again, he spotted the Guildmaster glaring at his secretary.

As they continued around the room, Muller kept on calling to Arcus, “this way!” and warning him to watch his footing, as though he were a child. Well, he *was* a child, but he also suspected she wouldn’t be so quick to treat him this way if it weren’t for his arm.

Once Arcus had finished presenting his inventions, the group stepped out onto the training ground to continue on their way, where they found Peacemaker, Mercuria String, and Swordsmith, Frederick Benjamin, apparently in a dispute with each other in front of a group of other magicians.

It was always hard with these two to decide whether they were enemies or best friends, particularly when they were exchanging barbs like this. There was a kindly looking young man with glasses between them, apparently trying to mediate. Arcus wondered whether he was another state magician. From the looks of things, he was the one leading the group.

“What’s going on over there?” Arcus asked.

“Those magicians are being examined for the National Diploma of Sorcery.”

“It’s the first-stage practical exam, to be precise,” Muller added.

Arcus visited the Guild frequently, but he’d never witnessed anyone taking the exam before. The National Diploma of Sorcery was said to be the most difficult exam in all of Lainur, and was required to become a state magician. The first stage was a written exam, followed by an interview and the first-stage practical exam. Any candidates left after that would take a final practical exam in front of the king.

A magician stepped out in front of some targets, and soon the air was filled with artglyphs as he cast a spell. A magic circle rose into the sky, with large fiery arrows shooting from its center. Those arrows burned up every last target, enveloping one part of the grounds in a raging fire.

When he was finished, the magician turned to his three examiners and

proclaimed self-assuredly, “The spell I just demonstrated produces ten more arrows than its traditional version!” He then went on to explain in more details other ways in which he had improved the spell.

The state magicians showed no reaction, other than to carry out their paperwork. Presumably, they couldn’t listen to the candidate’s explanation without risking their impartiality. Either that, or what the candidate was saying wasn’t worth their attention.

The next magician whipped up a gust of wind. “This version is substantially more powerful than that used in the military!” The magician followed the lead of the first and explained the spell, only to garner the same response from the judges.

The other magicians displayed all kinds of spells after that, but all of them were reworked or empowered versions of preexisting magic.

“This is sort of disappointing,” Arcus mumbled his thoughts aloud.

All of these magicians were brimming with aether, and their spells were truly impressive. There was no denying their ability. The problem was, their spells were too conventional. They were unimaginative, lacking in originality.

Perhaps Arcus had been spoiled by the magic he’d seen from Craib, Noah, Cazzy, Ceylan, and others, but seeing the same old spells simply made more powerful or efficient failed to excite him. A state magician’s magic was supposed to be something magnificent, something awe-inspiring, and that was far from what these candidates could muster.

Godwald nodded his agreement. “Disappointing indeed. I doubt we shall have many new state magicians this year. It’s becoming a worrying trend.”

“Is that right?” Arcus said.

“State magicians must stand head and shoulders above the rest,” Muller explained. “You have grown up around state magicians, so I’m sure you have a much better judgment of what it takes.”

State magicians were powerful enough that their presence alone sufficed to turn the tide on the battlefield, and it was clear to Arcus now that they didn’t just grow on trees. He had been hoping to witness something fantastical here

today, but it seemed that wouldn't be happening.

Godwald watched as Arcus returned with Balgeuse to one of his production offices to finish up his report, then lit up a cigar. He blew the smoke up towards the sky pensively. "Our candidates this year had excellent written results, not to mention their aether."

"I suppose things are no different this year compared to any other. None of the worthy magicians of this generation had any interest in taking the exam." Muller pulled down the brim of her hat as if to protect herself from the sunlight. Though her tone was mellow, the green eyes obscured by her veil had a sharp glint to them as she surveyed the exam.

The most recent state magician to pass the exam was Alicia Rotterbell, also known as Dry Spell, but that wasn't for lack of capable magicians. Consider, for example, Arcus's servant, Noah Ingwayne. Though he was older than Alicia, he had such a high command of his studies as a student that his teacher, Mercuria String, wrote him a letter of recommendation to take the exam. He had firmly turned down the opportunity, instead going straight to Craib and asking to be taken on as a servant. Since then, he'd worked as both a private secretary and an aide, making it even clearer that he had the required talent.

"There's Arcus's other servant too," Godwald pointed out. "Cazzy Guari."

"Pinioneer, wasn't it? Yes, I remember seeing him on the battlefield back when he was a student. His mastery lies in supporting magic. I remember Mercuria and Cassim singing his praises."

Both magicians were top of their class in the Institute, and graduated with the highest marks across years. However, geniuses like them were few and far between.

"I suppose it's time we start looking at the younger generations," Godwald said.

"I've heard the headmaster's granddaughter holds an abundant supply of aether."

"Claudia?"

“Yes. I suppose you already know what the headmaster has to say about her.”

“No, as it happens. His Grace has never been the chatty type.”

“Oh...”

“But I can think of one other who might have potential.”

“Oh yes?”

“Another child who has been highly endorsed among the four dukedoms.”

“You mean by Duke Zeele, no doubt. I’ve heard His Grace is highly ambitious. Now, who is he endorsing?”

“A noble boy from the southern houses. He has already displayed talent well beyond that of his peers.”

“Ah yes, I know the rumors. Academically, they say he has far outperformed even his seniors at Harveston.”

“That’s him.” Godwald turned to the building Arcus and Balgeuse had disappeared into. “Muller. Suppose Arcus Raytheft passes the Diploma. Are you of the opinion that he can become a state magician?”

“I...am not entirely confident.”

“Hm. I would have to agree with you.”

“Ah, so you think so too?”

Both of them let out a dreary sigh.

“His aethometer is truly outstanding,” Muller went on. “I don’t think anybody could dispute that. He certainly holds the knowledge and intelligence to become a state magician, if only...”

“Selecting him as one of us would lead to complaints from the martial houses.”

Arcus possessed the talent to invent the aethometer, wipe out an entire imperial unit, and develop various Seal Tools. If that was the prowess he was displaying at this point, there was no telling what he could go on to do. Should Arcus want to become a state magician, he would likely have a strong supporter in the royal family. There was just one reason Muller and Godwald lacked

confidence in him.

“His lack of aether really is unfortunate.”

“Yes. That is what shall draw the objection of the other houses.”

There were still many martial families which clung to the outdated belief that one's aether was the be-all and end-all. As state magicians, neither Muller nor Godwald saw it as that vital personally.

“You've witnessed Arcus's magic for yourself, haven't you, Muller?”

“Yes, his Spinning Barrel. Though there are still many points on which it could be improved, it has been a long time since an offensive spell struck such fear in my heart.”

“The majority of Arcus's spells have that in common. Spells which cause more destruction than Flamrune, yet have a much shorter incantation.”

“It wouldn't surprise me if His Majesty made a claim to Arcus's head for 'examination,' should he ever see these spells for himself.”

“I heard His Majesty was saying such things regarding the aethometer. I truly fear for that boy's head if he continues on this path.”

Muller giggled. “How ghastly!”

Though they laughed, their expressions stiffened again almost at once.

“Although perhaps, if Arcus one day came up with a method to overcome his weakness...”

“...We would have no qualms about accepting him as a state magician,” Godwald finished.

Again, Muller giggled. “Does that mean, sir, that you already think him qualified?”

“You and I both know a magician is worth more than just their aether. Strength and knowledge far outstrip its value. An empty head and all the aether in the world does not a state magician make.”

“I couldn't agree more.”

“I sincerely hope that he manages it, so that he may support the next king.”

“Do you think he’s capable? They say changing your natural aether is impossible.”

“Who knows? If anybody could do it, I think it would be Arcus.”

“Because he knows things which we don’t...doesn’t he? I can’t help but wonder what wellspring feeds that fount of knowledge.”

“Unfortunately, I do not have the answer either. What I can say is this: that knowledge has the potential to wrench this kingdom’s future from its course.”

Godwald gazed at the boy emerging from the building once more, his eyes filled with expectation.

Epilogue: When Arcus Made [REDACTED]

Arcus Raytheft was in his own kitchen, a room he finally had full access to after his years of living at the Raytheft estate, where he had needed permission. Now that he had his own place, he could use each room whenever and however he pleased. He could cook whenever he liked, and make whatever he wanted. Though small, it was one of the pleasures that having his own space had afforded him.

“What are your plans for today, Master Arcus?”

“Well asked, Mr. Ingvayne! Today, I shall be making a dessert!”

“Is that why you called me too?”

“Correct, Eido. I hope you’re ready to work hard.”

“More than ready.” Eido seemed strangely enthusiastic. “You’ve been more particular about cooking lately. Have you decided to give up on sorcery and become a chef?”

“No, there’s just a lotta stuff I wanna eat. And if I wanna eat it, I gotta make it first.”

Lainur’s sweets were lackluster at best, despite the abundance of ingredients available here. Sugar was expensive, but not prohibitively so for nobility, so it was incomprehensible to Arcus that nobody had thought to push the boundaries of what they could do with the ingredient. They already had a tea culture here, which should have been a prime opportunity for somebody to create cakes or cookies, but no matter where Arcus looked, it was always the same, uninspired boiled sweets.

Without cookies, cake was a pipe dream, and chocolate was a pipe dream’s pipe dream. Arcus just couldn’t wrap his head around it.

“Hey, Noah, how come there’s no candy here except those lumps of boiled sugar?”

“I’m afraid there is no answer to your question aside from ‘that’s just the way it is.’”

“But when it comes to food, the nicer it tastes, the better, right?”

“I agree. I believe the reasoning may stem from *The Spiritual Age*.”

“Huh?”

“It is said that the people of those times would offer colorful boiled candy to spirits and sprites. It is a matter of tradition that one can still buy this type of candy today.”

“Now that you mention it,” Eido said, “I rarely see any other variety, no matter where I go. And I’ve traveled a *lot*.”

“Is that why no one’s ever bothered to make anything sweet to go with tea?”

It still sounded like a lame excuse to Arcus. Living things craved sugar naturally, which was why humanity had put so much effort into pleasurable ways of consuming it—in the man’s world, at least.

“Perhaps it is because there has been a historic lack of ingredients which can be combined with sugar,” Noah said. “The milk and eggs you buy may be widely available at the market now, but they have not always been so easy to obtain.”

“I guess there’s not much scope to experiment without the right ingredients...”

On this point at least, perhaps he had been wrong to compare the man’s world to this one. Automobiles and trains didn’t exist here, logistics were poor, and duck was the only meat anybody would consume on a daily basis. Chickens were valued much more for their eggs than their meat, and cows were too difficult to feed sustainably.

With pigs, there was the fact that the hex-fearing citizens of the kingdom could not abide the threat of a sounder breaking loose and contaminating the environs. Their rearing was highly controlled and limited to specialized facilities, making pork somewhat of a delicacy. If Arcus was ever to achieve his dream of eating one burger a week, he would need to wait till he had his own territory, so he could set up his own pig farm.

“Nobles who can afford a steady supply of ingredients tend to favor cuisine which *looks* impressive. Colorful candy fits that bill nicely, and always goes down well at parties.”

“That makes sense, since nobility is all about appearances. It makes sense that they’d make stuff to look amazing over tasting amazing.”

“I believe the reason may also lie in Lainur’s prolific martial houses,” Noah continued.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“The royal family, too, is a martial house, one which promotes fortitude and vigor. To Lainur’s west lies the Gillis Empire; to its east, ethnic tribes like the Hans; and to its south, Granciel. Neighbors such as these make disputes common, and the nobility here must constantly devote itself to battle. Though it is now in a state of relative peace, the capital itself was a horrific place to be only ten or twenty years ago.”

“You mean there was so much war that people didn’t have time to worry about sweets, and it was only a small while before I was born that things calmed down?”

“It is pure supposition, but I believe it is an explanation which holds some water.”

“Huh. I guess desserts are a luxury they couldn’t afford...”

Culture flourished primarily in periods where money and time were plentiful. Running a war required tremendous amounts of food for soldiers, leaving commoners with less. Especially if war was constant, any surplus ingredients that might have been used to create desserts would have ended up as provisions for the military. The constant conflict might also explain why Arcus was left scratching his head at some of the more primitive design choices he’d seen in noble gardens; the engines of culture had only just stirred from an idle state.

Noah turned his attention to the ingredients and cooking utensils on the table. “You are not planning to use magic in order to bulk up your food, are you?”

“Why would I bother doing that? I’m not a sumo wrestler, y’know.”

Eido explained, “It’s an idea that comes from the old tale, The Cloud of Lascatis.”

“The Cloud of Lascatis?”

“Yes. It’s a story of a man who used magic to bulk up his food, and while it succeeded in making him feel full, no matter how much he ate, he wouldn’t stop losing weight. It was as if the bewitched food turned into nothing more than clouds, or mist. It is a cautionary tale against those who would attempt to magic food out of thin air.”

“I get it. The food you make’ll taste good and fill you up, but you won’t absorb any nutrients from it. Sounds great for people on a diet.”

“Master Arcus, please explain your use of the word ‘diet’ in this context.”

“You know, it’s what those people who want to lose weight without trying do. The world’s full of ’em, right?”

“Is it now? And in your twelve years, I suppose you’ve traveled so widely as to be able to back up your claim?”

Eido chuckled.

“Okay,” Arcus countered, “but I’m actually curious about what’s out there, food culture-wise. I know a certain someone who seems to know more about this kinda stuff than me, but they clammed up last time I tried to ask about it.”

Arcus got to work making his sweet treat while they conversed. Since he couldn’t make much use of his left arm, Eido handled most of the physical labor, but even limited to one arm, this was an easier endeavor than the castella. He’d needed to rely heavily on Eido then to make the meringue. In comparison, this recipe was much simpler.

When he was done, Arcus put the treat into a makeshift refrigerator. All that was left was to wait for it to cool. He then tidied up and got on with other work, impatient for his dessert to be ready. While holed up in his room, he was interrupted by a familiar—but uninvited—guest.

“Hi, Arcus. Is the dessert done yet?”

Arcus knew it was Sue without turning around. Her voice had sounded like it came from outside.

“Hey! Get off my property!”

“C’mon, you don’t really mind me showing up, right? Wait, is that Cazzy in an *apron*?! It actually suits him too!”

Arcus came down from his room to find a cleaning Cazzy being harassed by Sue. Noah was already by her side, ready to show her in. Cazzy looked visibly uncomfortable under her curious gaze.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” Arcus asked. Sue was already enrolled at the Institute.

“I slipped out. None of the lectures today interested me.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?” Arcus turned to the one more likely to have played hooky of the Institute graduates in the room.

“For sure. Doesn’t matter how good your grades are, if ya skip, it’s gonna come back to bite ya when it’s time to move up to the next class.”

“Right,” Arcus said, “so you’re like a college student who’s given up graduating because you already know you’re not gonna get a high enough grade.”

“I dunno what you’re talking about, but I’ll have you know I haven’t given up on anything!”

“The most logical conclusion is that Lady Susia holds some sort of privilege which allows her to skip lectures while evading punishment,” Noah said.

“Yup! You got it!” Sue nodded.

“What?! That’s not fair!” Arcus protested.

“Of course it’s fair! The Institute knows I’ve got way more important stuff to do than sit in lectures all day!”

“Like show up to my house for no reason?”

“I’ve got a reason. I’m here to study!”

Arcus found it hard to wrap his mind around the fact that she skipped out on

a taught lecture for the sake of furthering her education anyway.

“I can see how discussing magic with Master Arcus might prove a worthwhile experience,” Noah said.

“Yup, ’specially if they go into the more advanced stuff,” Cazzy agreed.

“Really, guys?” Despite Arcus’s tone, he took their words as a compliment. At least until they started complaining of his habit of saying “complete nonsense.”

“I’m not just here for study either,” Sue continued.

“No?”

“I’m here to treat your arm too.”

“What?”

“I said I was gonna. Remember?”

“Sorta...”

“I did! So c’mon, let’s get moving!”

“Hey! Quit pushing me! *In my own house!*”

The pair moved to one of the rooms in the house’s tower, which was built right next to one corner of the main, square part of the building. Such architecture was common in the man’s country around the time western culture started to influence its own, and it had a historic feel to it. It was an atrium, its front paneled with glass to give a view of the outside and its back filled with bookshelves, bordered by the stairs which curved around them. South-facing, it caught much of the sunlight and was a bright, pleasant space to be in. Complete with a soft carpet, couch, and table, Arcus used it as both a drawing room and a space to relax.

“Your house gets a four outta ten from me,” Sue declared. “The garden’s too small.”

“That sounds like something Count Roheim would say.”

“I-I-It does *not!*”

“What’s with the overreaction?” Arcus asked. “Anyway, look, this is the best I can afford right now.”

“So what’s next in the cards? You gonna go for something even bigger?”

“I’m only twelve, remember?”

Ignoring him, Sue took charge again. “All righty, take a seat. Don’t be shy.”

“Noah.” Arcus turned to his servant. “This *is* my house, right?”

“Yours is indeed the name written on the deed.”

“They have laws about this, right?” Cazzy cackled. “Effective control, or whatever?”

“Give her an inch and she’ll take a mile,” Arcus muttered.

“It all belongs to me!” Sue said. “Everything that I see!”

“Spoken like a true noble...”

She hadn’t been here five minutes before she acted like the place belonged to her, and that was what scared Arcus most of all.

Cazzy escaped by excusing himself to do more cleaning, while Noah went to adjust the lace curtain to regulate the room’s light. Arcus and Sue sat down together on the couch. Arcus realized it had been a while since they’d been alone together, Noah notwithstanding.

Sue’s long black hair was as glossy as ever. Her blue eyes sparkled as if set with gems, and though her skin was light, it had a healthy tinge and tension to it, overall giving the impression that it was too precious to touch. She seemed to have grown a little, and her body had a bit more shape to it. They were sitting close enough for Arcus to pick up the gentle scent coming off her—one he felt might throw his heartbeat off rhythm if he wasn’t careful.

Ignorant to Arcus’s self-consciousness, Sue kept on talking. “How’s your arm doing?”

“It’s still way off normal, but it’s better than it was.”

As soon as Arcus had his sleeve up, Sue wasted no time in starting her examination, grabbing his arm, and bending and stretching it. She frowned.

“What’s with this bruise? It’s weird...”

“Hm? Oh hey, you’re right.”

“It looks like it’s got a pattern to it.”

Sue was referring to a dark red bruise that Arcus hadn’t noticed till now. Its shape was peculiar, as if designed with purpose.

“Hm. It looks kinda like a phoenix.”

“Yeah, it does. Especially with this long part here, like its tail,” Sue agreed.

“What mark have you branded me with, you witch?!”

“It’s a curse! You gotta show this to five people and brand them with the same mark, or you’ll have bad luck forever!”

“A chain letter?! How old are you?”

“Same age as you.”

“R-Right. Of course...”

Never mind how old she was, she didn’t even inhabit the same world as chain letters.

Once Sue was done examining Arcus’s arm, she immediately cast a healing spell on it, one which used quite a lot of aether. It was an impressive spell, perhaps just short of legendary, and something Arcus would never have the aether to cast even in his wildest dreams. Not even the healers at the Guild had used this spell on him.

“It’s not fair how you’ve got so much aether,” Arcus muttered.

“Yeah.” Sue sounded sympathetic. “You don’t have enough to cast this.”

“Y’know, it’d be nice if you could bottle up the aether you don’t use, so I could use it for myself.”

“Like a physical aether store? That would be neat.”

“I guess the only way to get one is to find a way to bank aether for myself,” Arcus said. “But there are other hurdles I need to cross before I can even think of that.”

“How’s your arm feel now, anyway?”

Arcus tried moving it. “Way better.”

“Really?! That’s great!” Sue beamed, as if hers were the arm that had healed.

There was a major difference in Arcus’s arm before and after the spell. Before, even just a small movement gave way to a frail dullness; now it had a bit more vitality to it.

“I’ll do my best to keep treating you till it’s completely healed, okay?”

“Right. Thanks...” Arcus was on the brink of tears from his friend’s kindness.

“Now let’s have dessert?”

“Way to ruin the moment.”

“Hey, I worked hard! I think I deserve a reward.”

Arcus no longer felt like crying.

Noah clapped his hands together, as though an idea had struck him. “Would you perhaps like to sample the dessert Master Arcus just made?”

“N-Noah?! Are you insane?!”

Noah gave Arcus a quizzical look. “Did you not make it with Lady Susia in mind?”

“No! Well, sort of. But no!”

“You made a new dessert, Arcus?!”

“I’ve made nothing.” Arcus tried to double-down with a nervous laugh, but it was too late.

Sue narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s too late to fool me now.”

“Nngh...”

Just then, the door opened, revealing Eido in his chef’s uniform with a trolley in tow.

“Pardon the intrusion. I’ve come with tea and snacks.”

There was a serious expression on Eido’s face as he carried out his work deftly, as though he had been a chef his entire life. On top of the trolley was a tea set, and two small yellow mounds topped with caramel.

“Eido!” Arcus screamed. “What are you doing?!”

“My...job? I heard you had an important guest, so I’ve brought the dessert you made earlier.”

“You didn’t think to ask me?!”

“I thought you were planning to serve these to your friend anyway,” Eido said.

“I was, but I wasn’t...” Arcus grumbled.

The dessert the three of them had made earlier was a classic pudding. Eido placed one of them in front of Sue before filling her cup with tea.

“Thanks! I knew you’d have my back, Eido!” Sue cheered.

“But of course.” Eido smiled widely, leaving Arcus to wonder when the two had gotten so close. All of a sudden, it felt as though a spy had made their way into the home. Adding to his confusion, he couldn’t even remember the two of them speaking at his recent house party.

“What is this, then? Dessert? It sure looks weird.” Sue was frowning at her pudding. “It’s all wobbly too. Looks like steamed eggs...” She poked at the pudding a couple of times with her spoon to test its integrity.

Arcus had portioned out the ingredients according to his memory, so the flavor was sure to be a perfect match. That was the problem. He could already imagine how Sue would react once she had a taste. He had gotten away with his pork buns thanks to the difficulty of obtaining the meat, but milk and eggs were much easier to come by in the capital. Once Sue tasted the mind-blowing combination that was milk, eggs, and sugar, well...

“Here goes!” Scooping the top from her pudding, Sue brought the spoon to her mouth. “Whoa...” Her eyes widened at once, and a dreamy expression crossed her face. She started devouring the pudding at great speed, each bite stretching the smile on her face wider and wider. Once she was done, she rearranged her features into something much more dignified, and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. “Yes, quite delectable. Do I detect milk? And eggs?”

“Yeah. You mix the beaten eggs with milk and sugar, then steam the mixture to set it. After that, you cool it.”

Sue looked surprised. “Is it really that simple a process?”

“You wouldn’t think so, right? Sugar’s usually used to make boiled candy, put in tea, or sweeten beans while boiling, isn’t it? You don’t get anything like the desserts I served at my party.”

“Indeed. Are there any other varieties of dessert you know how to make?”

“Not really. I’m not a chef or a pâtissier, and I’ve only got the odd recipe in my head. Unless it’s something simple, the only way I can learn to make anything is by trial and error, like with those pork buns.”

“I see...”

“Don’t look so disappointed. I think I’ve done pretty well, considering.”

Clearly, Sue had been expecting him to cater to her whims and present her with dessert after dessert. It was as he expected; all humans were born with a sweet tooth.

“Now, Arcus, please do enlighten me. How have you christened this dessert?” Sue asked.

Arcus stared at her. If the formal speech was a joke, she was taking it a little too far now. Sue’s eyes widened, as though she realized why he was looking at her strangely.

“I-I mean, what d’you call it?” She smiled and blinked at him incessantly, as though it would somehow help in wiping Arcus’s memory of the last few minutes. He was almost impressed by her optimism.

“Pudding,” he answered.

“Pudding...it somehow fits. I’ve never had anything like it, y’know.”

“Yeah, no one else makes it.”

“Can I have another one?”

“No. There’s only one left, and it’s mine,” Arcus said firmly.

“Aww, c’mon! Don’t be stingy!”

“I’m not! I only made these today too. I gotta have a taste, or I won’t know what to improve for next time!”

“I’m telling you now, they’re perfect. Promise!” Sue grinned at him like a

mascot on a cereal box.

“I’m sure it mostly tastes fine, but I’m not used to these ingredients yet! I gotta know for sure!”

“It’s just milk, eggs, and sugar though, right?”

“It’s not that simple! Eggs depend on the variety of bird, milk from the cow, and there’s a whole range of different kinds of sugar!”

“You sure are fussy, Arcus.” Sue stared at him, looking somewhat exasperated. She turned her gaze to the pudding and then to Noah, stretching out her hands towards him as though begging for the plate. Noah passed it to her without hesitation. “Yay! Thanks!”

“You’re not welcome! Why’d you give it to her, Noah?!”

Noah hesitated. “There are certain hierarchies which must be respected.”

“Noah,” Arcus sighed. “*I’m* your master, not her. You’re *my* servant. Which means you’ve gotta listen to what I say. Or am I wrong?”

“So he’s mine too! That means he’s gotta listen to what I say!” Sue insisted.

“Just ‘cause you said it doesn’t make it true! What about you, Eido? You’re not in this girl’s pocket too, are you?!”

“Sorry, Arcus,” was all Eido said.

“Seriously?! You all work for me in *my* house! Why are you all against me?!”

“Remember, Arcus, everything I see belongs to—”

“That wasn’t funny the first time you said it!”

But Sue was not to be put off. “Look, can I eat this already? Please?”

“I already told you, that’s my portion.”

“So you’re gonna refuse your guest, huh? I see how it is.”

“I made that much precisely so I could have some myself.”

“Let’s go halvesies, then! That’ll solve everything, right?”

“Or you could just accept it’s not that big a deal and let me have all of it!”

The two squabbled over the pudding for quite some time. Afterward, they studied magic together until Sue eventually headed home. Cazzy poked his head around the door almost as soon as she was gone.

“So, did ya end up goin’ halvesies or what?”

“I had to!” Arcus snapped back. “Or we were gonna be there forever!”

No matter how much he pushed, Sue failed to back down, and so in the end Arcus had no choice but to give in.

Apparently his servants weren’t so sympathetic.

“Gotcha,” Cazzy said. “So you’re a pushover.”

“Quite,” Noah agreed. “I think Master Arcus may have a promising career ahead of him as a doormat. At least in his domestic life.”

“If you guys don’t shut up right now, I’m gonna knock your heads off!”

“Oh boy, we better be careful!” Cazzy laughed.

“Allow me to make a correction. Master Arcus may have a promising career ahead of him as a *tyrannical* doormat.”

With that, Arcus’s servants scattered from the room, leaving him to stew alone.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's been a while. This is the author, Gamei Hitsuji.

Thank you very much for picking up this copy of *The Magician Who Rose From Failure* Volume 5. I suppose, at this point, none of you has picked up this volume as their first... But thank you very much for reading the series up to this volume. Please accept my apologies for how much space it will take up on your shelf.

This volume carries on after the war of the previous volume, and includes the reactions of some very important players from various nations. Arcus gets an audience with the king, and Eido, a character exclusive to this printed version, gets to confront His Majesty too. Then Arcus holds a celebration party, where we get to see the heroines again for the first time in a while...perhaps. Finally we have the bout between Charlotte and Arcus, and I threw in a little bonus story that I'd also published online.

I also got to include the scene of the thrilling award ceremony that everyone loved so much! What would a war chronicle be without recognizing the achievements of those who fought so hard? Will Arcus be rewarded for his efforts? You'll have to read it to find out!

And if you *have* finished the volume already, you'll know that there aren't really any battles in here. No magic either. I'm sorry to everyone who was looking forward to some action. I should be able to include some magic battles in the next volume, even if I have to make them fit, so I'd be grateful if you could look forward to that.

Also, volume 2 of the manga version is out now! The cover features Arcus and Noah, with blue as its main color. I'd love it if you could pick up a copy!

To close, I would like to give thanks to the following people: GC Novels, my illustrator and lead artist of the manga version, Saika Fushimi, my editor K, manga editor H, my proofreading company Oraido, and my supportive readers.

Thank you all so much.

Glossary

The Gillis Empire

A huge nation in the continent's northwest. It holds several times as much territory as Lainur, and their population is incomparable. It invests more in industry than magical technology, focusing on manufacturing on a grand scale. One of the world's major powers, its imperial reputation is backed up by its ongoing invasions of several nations. It is the Empire's southern field army that is currently fighting the kingdom. The Empire's head of state is Rihaltio Gilrandy.

The Northern Confederation

A nation to the north of Lainur made up of several smaller countries banded together. Its current leader is Meifa Darnénes. It is allied with Lainur and opposes the Gillis Empire, as all the Empire's neighbors do. It was known as Alnorsace in ancient times.

The Maritime Nation of Granciel

A nation to the south of Lainur. Its southern side faces the ocean, and it controls the majority of those waters. Barbaros zan Grandon is the nation's head of state. Rather than a maritime nation, it may be more accurate to call it a pirate nation. Although technically a long-time rival nation of Lainur, the relationship between the two countries is not as bad as you might expect.

Bǎi Liánbāng

A nation in the east of the continent made up of several ethnic groups; it lies on the opposite side of the Cross Mountain Range from Lainur. Its dress and culture is similar to China in the man's world. The Crosellodes' ancestors came from here. It is currently extending its influence eastwards, so the scale of its

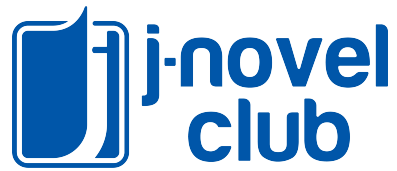
territory and population is unknown.



Louise raised her glass. “Let us drink to our kingdom’s glory,
and to His Royal Highness, Prince Ceylan Crosselode’s victory!”

The second Arcus had his blade at her throat, he witnessed her thrust out her rapier in the same manner. She had her weapon aimed precisely at his throat in a counterstrike.





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

The Magician Who Rose From Failure: Volume 5

by Hitsuji Gamei

Translated by Alexandra Owen-Burns Edited by Will Holcomb

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Hitsuji Gamei Illustrations by Fushimi Saika

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

This English edition is published by arrangement with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: November 2022

Premium E-Book